

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



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Prologue: The Hero and the Demon Queen

Within the deepest recesses of the demon kingdom, there stood a castle with a throne room at its heart—here, the Demon Queen reigned over the land.

In this place, two enemies were locked in combat.

One was a handsome young man, whose lithe physique belied a fierce inner strength. He was equipped with a full set of armor and a slender longsword, both forged from silver. Overall, he was a remarkable example of a hero.

His opponent, the wielder of a black rapier, could have been mistaken for a bewitching woman, except for the ram horns sprouting from her head and the sinister robe that enshrouded her. She was the mistress of this castle—the Demon Queen.

Without exchanging a single word, the two fighters lunged toward one another, their swords clashing in the middle. The Demon Queen met the hero's brutal slash head-on, and although the rapier was slimmer than the hero's longsword, her blade blocked the attack with ease. A lesser sword would have snapped in two.

They disengaged for a moment, only to jump back into the fray. This time, the hero repelled the Demon Queen's thrust with the flat of his blade. His longsword readily absorbed the impact, deflecting a blow that would have pierced clean through a regular sword.

Their blades met again and again, as both parties wielded their chosen weapons with perfect confidence. The battle wore on, and eventually, their expressions took on identical shades of bewilderment. Both the hero and the Demon Queen had equipped themselves with a god-tier weapon, so it was unfathomable to them that this battle had not yet ended. The same thought lingered in each fighter's mind—*shouldn't my opponent's weapon have long reached its limit under this assault?*

Their shared puzzlement soon brought them to a halt. They both lowered

their swords simultaneously.

The hero spoke first. "Demon Queen, I have a question for you, unrelated to our fight."

"Fine," she replied. "I have one for you as well, likely along the same lines."

"Then, if I may. Which blacksmith forged your sword?"

"Just as I suspected," she remarked. "I wanted to ask who forged yours."

"It must've been..."

"Yes. A certain stubborn and grizzled blacksmith made my rapier," the Demon Queen confirmed. She sheathed the weapon and showed her blade's pommel to the hero. Imprinted upon it was a plump cat squatting on its haunches.

The hero turned his own pommel to face the Demon Queen, displaying the same insignia. "I see. Damn that geezer."

The Demon Queen sighed. "He must've forged both of our weapons knowing that this was going to happen. How conniving."

"There's no point in fighting any longer," the hero said.

"We could always see whose strength fails first."

"It's clear that we're equal in that regard."

"True," the Demon Queen conceded. "No matter which one of us wins, ultimately exhaustion would leave the victor vulnerable to attack. It's meaningless to continue."

"Well then, I suppose there's only one option."

"Yes—let's agree to a truce, at least during our generation."

"I'll let *him* know too, all right?" said the hero.

"Go ahead. I have no objections. If we tell him, then neither of us will draw his ire, and it will keep us both in check. After all, it would be troublesome if one of us offended that humorless grump, and he backed the other's side."

"Okay, I'll proceed as discussed. Until we meet again."

"Farewell, hero," the Demon Queen said, turning on her heel. "Now then, I

must prepare a proclamation...”

They exited the throne room in opposite directions. Although the air had been thick with tension at the beginning of the battle, the hero and the Demon Queen—polar opposites in all regards—now wore the same expression of wry amusement as they recalled a blacksmith whose commonplace features were weathered by age.

Chapter 1: My Life Begins in Another World

When I woke up, I was on my back, and a cloudless blue sky hung high above me. Sitting up, I realized that I'd awoken in a woodland clearing surrounded by lush, green plant life. At a glance, it looked like any other forest in Japan, but that was impossible. I was no longer on Earth, or even in the same universe.

I was now in a completely new world.

###

Our story began on a day like any other.

Back on Earth, I used to work as a software engineer, toiling away seven days a week plus holidays *and* overtime in order to meet my release deadlines. One night, I was on my way home after work. It was around midnight, and I was heading toward the train station. Exhaustion had already claimed me, and I was dead on my feet, but then I saw a stray cat stagger onto the road. It seemed as unsteady as I was, and as I looked on, it stumbled right into the middle of the street.

Suddenly, I noticed that a truck was barreling straight for it.

Maybe the driver was drowsy or on their phone; maybe they were just being careless. Regardless, they showed no sign of slowing down at all and gave no indication that they'd even seen the cat. I was also barely managing to stay awake at that moment, so my speculation could be unreliable.

As soon as I processed what was happening, I sprinted for the cat. The truck and I were converging from different directions, and the race was on. It was anyone's guess who might reach the cat first—the truck had me beat in terms of speed, but I'd started closer to my target.

I rapidly closed in on the cat, lifted it up by the torso, and flung it out of the way. Unfortunately, considering what happened next, the truck won our contest by a landslide. What did it win, you ask? That's a discussion for another time.

There was a sickening thud. The impact knocked me off my feet and tossed me into the air. Nonsensically, some stories about parents lifting vehicles to save their kids rushed through my head as everything faded to black.

###

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before I'd awoken, or to be more precise, regained consciousness. A blank white expanse surrounded me, and I was floating within it. I couldn't even see my own body, but I felt both perfectly alert and half asleep at the same time. It was as if I'd been suspended in a vague state of semi-existence.

"Hey, you're awake?" The words were delivered in the voice of a young woman.

"If you can call it that, then yes," I replied, confused by my current perception of reality.

I wasn't exactly *hearing* her (I assumed that the voice belonged to a woman). To clarify, no sound waves were reaching my ears. I also wasn't really *speaking*, since speech was defined as air passing from the lungs through the vocal cords to produce vibrations. Telepathy might be the most fitting term for our communication; she was projecting her thoughts toward me, and likewise, I sent my thoughts toward her. It was a circuitous interpretation of a conversation.

"Looks like I've managed to preserve your soul, even if I had to overreach my authority to do so," said the voice.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"In short, you died in your world. Normally, your soul would've been disassembled and repurposed into new resources," she explained. "You were a software engineer, right? In technical terms, the section of memory containing your soul would've been deallocated if I hadn't locked it first. I wasn't supposed to do that though."

"I more or less understand the situation," I said. "So, now what?"

I felt oddly serene, even though she'd just casually informed me that I was dead.

“That’s good. I want you to stay calm. I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve had to temporarily rewire your consciousness to suppress your fear of dying. Otherwise, your soul would start to deteriorate—in other words, the garbage collector would’ve seen the flag for deallocation and automatically deleted your soul to free up memory. At that point, you would’ve ceased to exist both physically and figuratively.”

“All right,” I said, still at peace.

“Thank you for your understanding. Moving along, do you remember saving a stray cat?”

“Yes, of course. I love cats.”

That’s right. Although I was over forty and my looks regularly attracted police attention, I loved small animals and was particularly fond of cats. That day, I’d been physically worn out from the combination of my advancing age and lots of consecutive overtime; I’d been mentally exhausted from burnout.

My love of cats was the final star in a miraculous constellation—albeit, an unlucky one—and the result was an unthinkable heroic dash to my death.

All of that rambling boiled down to one simple statement: *I love cats*.

“That cat was me,” said the voice. “I was on duty as a Watchdog, but of course, that means nothing to you. Let’s see, are you familiar with parallel universe theory?”

“Yes, it often appears in sci-fi and fantasy,” I replied.

“Good. That’ll make this conversation easier. My job is to patrol different universes and watch for catastrophic cross-world events. That is, any event in one world that would negatively impact another.”

I sensed a trace of pride in her not-voice. Indeed, it was a job that no human could perform. “That’s pretty impressive,” I said honestly.

“There are pros and cons to the job, but more cons, I’d say.”

I guess I shouldn’t have bothered with the compliment.

“In any case, yes, it’s not something that just anyone can do. There are dire consequences if a Watchdog misses a warning sign and allows an event to

proceed unhindered. Anyway, enough about me—back to the explanation.” She sat up straighter (at least, that’s how it felt to me) and carried on. “While I was patrolling your world as a cat, I made a mistake that should’ve led to my death. That’s when you saved me. Currently, we’re in a liminal space that I can access.”

“Could that truck really have killed you?” I asked straight out. It’d be a vital flaw in the system for someone with such a critical responsibility to be mortal, just the same as any other living being.

“My temporary body would’ve died, but not my soul. My body for any given world is chosen from the native fauna, and my physical abilities are limited accordingly. It’d be hard for me to pass unnoticed otherwise. This way, even if I die, I leave no trace. However, dying is still a major problem because I can’t fulfill my duty until I get another body. I’m sure that losing your physical body has left you in a bit of a pickle too.”

A pickle, she said, as if this wasn’t the biggest mess I’d ever been in.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I have one caveat to add to our parallel universes discussion. Do you think that most worlds only differ from each other in trivial ways?”

“Yes, as far as I know. At least, that’s the way it’s portrayed in books and games.”

“Here are two comparative scenarios: In one world, you decide to stop for a drink after work, thus causing you to take a train that happens to be delayed, so you return home very late. In another world, you go straight home without a hitch. Do you think this is how multiverse theory functions?”

“Seems right.”

“To be blunt, that’s not how it works. Worlds aren’t actually created on the turn of a dime. In our example, your decision to get a drink becomes part of that world’s natural equilibrium. If you were to go straight home on your regular train instead, you would throw off the balance.”

The disembodied voice continued, “Maybe you arrive home early and overhear a couple arguing. You report it to the police. The couple’s relationship crumbles. As a result, they never give birth to a child, and the harmony of the

world is disrupted. The whole thing is a bit more nuanced, but the saying still applies—there are no might-have-beens in history.”

The explanation made sense as long as I didn’t think about it too hard. I kept quiet and urged her to continue.

“I’ve gotten a little sidetracked, but in a nutshell, that’s how parallel worlds work. Needless to say, since universes don’t infinitely branch off each other, there aren’t any clones of you in worlds similar to your own. There’s only you, and *you* weren’t supposed to have died yet. When you saved my life at the expense of your own, you introduced a bug into the system—one that affects the world, your own life, and mine as well. Three fates were changed, each in a different way, and world alterations are preventable only if we fill the hole you’ve left behind. The quickest way to restore balance would’ve been to rewrite the timeline and say that you miraculously survived without a scratch. However, that road is closed to us. Fundamentally, my job as a Watchdog is to report on the state of the multiverse; my accounts of events are logged in many different worlds. Because I witnessed it, your death in that world cannot be reversed.”

Our conversation had taken a drastic turn for the worse. “Then it sounds like we’re out of options. Why did you bother preserving my soul?” I asked.

“There *is* one more option. We can find a replacement for you in your world, and then send you to a different one,” she replied.

“That’s possible? From what you’ve said so far, it doesn’t seem like that would be allowed,” I remarked.

“Hmm, how do I put this?” she pondered aloud. “There are several worlds that are experiencing the same predicament as yours; those universes contain voids where someone’s existence should be. We can send people across the multiverse to fill those open spaces. That said, you’ll have to choose from the worlds in my docket, so there’s a limited number of places you can go.”

“Basically, you’re swapping me with someone else, right?” I asked.

“You catch on quick! That’s the gist of it. You’d still be considered dead in your original world, but you can live on in a new one.”

“I see. Can I ask a question?”

“Of course. Please do,” she said.

“Why keep me alive at all?”

“Oh, right. I was going to get to that. One reason is for my peace of mind; I wouldn’t be able to rest easy knowing that someone died because of my mistake. Don’t tell anyone I said that though. I want you to remember that we need to preserve the system’s equilibrium.”

“Strangely, I find it hard to accept that you’re now asking me to take this in stride,” I said. “In any case, I don’t have a choice, right?”

“I’m sorry, but no, you don’t. However, you’ll be able to choose your destination. Plus, in your new world, you’ll be granted certain privileges—cheat abilities. They won’t be anything that’d break the rules of the world or the multiverse, so rest assured, you can ask for whatever you want.”

“Let’s see...” I said, taking my time to think. My cheat ability couldn’t be so overpowered that it would throw the world off-kilter, huh? How do I make the most out of my second shot at life?

After a moment, I had my answer. “Well, I like making scale models and working with my hands in my time off, so I’d like to live in a place—preferably alone—where I can create things for a living. I’d like a compatible skill set for that life. And as I said before, I like cats, so if I could have a quiet life with a cat as a companion, I’d have no complaints.”

“All right,” she said, pausing to consider the options. “Out of the available candidates, the world that would best accommodate your requests is a typical fantasy realm with swords and sorcery. How does that sound?”

“Fine by me.”

“All right. Now, on to your skills. What do you want to make?”

“I’ve always wanted to try swordsmithing,” I suggested.

“Then a blacksmith would likely be the most fitting profession. You’ll need language and crafting skills. I can also throw in some fighting skills for your self-defense. As a trade-off, you’ll have the bare minimum in magical ability, but you

won't need it for day-to-day life anyway. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Last but not least," she continued, "how old do you want to be? Pick whatever age calls to you, whether it's ten years old or seventy. You won't want to be too old, I suppose, but it's all the same to me."

"Hmmm, I don't want to be a kid again..." But that said, I *did* want enough time to enjoy my second life. I gave it some thought and landed on something in the middle.

###

After I gave an answer, my consciousness slowly faded...and when I woke up, I was already in this forest. I stood up cautiously, expecting some dizziness, but I shouldn't have been worried. I looked down at my hands, but I couldn't tell whether I was now the age that I'd requested. *Hands change slowly over time, I suppose.*

As I took a breath, a sharp pain lanced through my head.

While your body is adjusting to the new environment, you may get a headache. That's proof that your new skills, knowledge, and memories are syncing up with your body, so don't worry.

"So this is what she'd meant. Did it have to hurt this much? She wasn't going to give me any particularly powerful skills anyway," I grumbled to myself.

I'll prepare a place where you can live and work as a blacksmith, along with some provisions, like food and ingredients.

Or so she'd said, but looking around, there was nothing that stood out among the trees. Maybe it wasn't around here. While it was unlikely that she would've purposefully started me far away from my would-be home, it wasn't impossible. It'd be extremely irritating if that were the deal though. In the worst-case scenario, the place could be so far away that I'd never find it. This clearing where I'd woken up would've been the perfect spot for a house, but it was currently empty, so I struck out to explore my surroundings.

When I stepped into the forest proper, the fresh, woodsy scent hit me anew.

The sunlight filtered through the foliage, and it was pleasantly cool beneath the trees. The leaves rustled gently, along with the occasional chitter and patter above me. There must've been some small animals playing amongst the branches.

The trees themselves were no different from those in my original world. Elegant and tall, each tree was a pillar that held up the sky with its crown. I touched one of the trunks; the rough bark felt the same as well. As far as I could tell, there weren't any dryads emerging from the woodwork either.

I heard a scratching sound in the branches close by. Looking over, I saw a green, squirrel-like creature pop out from amongst the leaves. I'd never heard of any squirrels with green fur back on Earth, so this creature must've been unique to this world. Seeing its appearance struck home the fact that I was in a new universe!

I was so excited that I walked toward it without thinking. It shrunk back in fear, and I soon came to my senses. Even if it looked adorable, with its chubby cheeks and round eyes, it might be a dangerous animal. Maybe it was even venomous. I was in a completely unfamiliar environment, so I had to be on my guard.

When my headache subsided, a great torrent of knowledge flooded my mind. It was as if I'd just installed a new knowledge base. At least now I wouldn't be done in by my own ignorance. It would've been pathetic if I were decapitated for unwittingly insulting a noble, for example. However, even though the newly installed data had come with a general picture of this world, including information about the fauna, I didn't know any of the nitty-gritty details. What kind of habits did that green squirrel have? Was it venomous? I wished I had someone to guide me.

My stroll had yielded no great discoveries, so I turned back around and suddenly caught sight of something large back where I'd come from.

"What in the world?" I muttered. It definitely hadn't been there when I'd first passed through. Or maybe it'd been invisible, who knows?

The large something turned out to be a small log cabin. I guessed this was where I was supposed to live. The cabin looked safe enough, but I approached it

with caution nonetheless. As I drew closer, I could instinctively perceive that there was no one inside. Maybe heightened senses were part of my resurrection package as well.

I glanced through the window lattice, and the cabin looked empty inside. Just to be safe, I headed toward the door in a half-crouch, so I couldn't be seen from within. There was a simple pull handle and keyhole on the door, but no knob. I tugged lightly on the handle and the door opened easily—it hadn't been locked.

I peeked through the crack. There still weren't signs of anything living, and the air smelled clean. It seemed safe.

I stood up from my lowered stance and swung the door open. A muffled clattering sound startled me, and I quickly crouched back down. Nothing unusual happened after a few beats, so I relaxed and straightened back up, glancing around me.

The inside of the cabin looked like a ski lodge, except there was no second floor. Instead of a modern-style kitchen, there was a separate area with a dirt floor where a traditional Japanese charcoal stove stood, alongside a shelf for dishes and cutlery. There was a rope running through the kitchen, and beyond it was another door. Something on the other side of that threshold had probably created the sound I'd heard when I'd initially opened the door.

I closed the front door—there was another round of clacking—and slid the latch closed. The room was large; there was more than enough space for the sizable table and several chairs. In the rafters, I could see something that looked like wooden clappers. The sound earlier had been muffled, so these couldn't have been the cause. Something else must've triggered it. My curiosity was piqued, but I let it go for now.

In the corner of the room, there stood three more doors. The first one led to a bathroom. I reasoned that, since I'd yet to come across anywhere to sleep, one of the remaining two doors must open to a bedroom. However, the next door I tried revealed a study with a large desk and bookshelves. The last doorway ended up leading to the bedroom. It was sparsely furnished with a wide bed, a nightstand, a desk, and a small stool, which reminded me of the cheap, bare-bones rooms that businessmen booked during work trips.

Now, onto the main attraction: the place where the magic—or smithing—happened. I was eager to see the equipment that had been prepared for me, but I also hoped it was practical. I wasn't going to take on apprentices; it was just going to be me for the foreseeable future, so even if there were a fancy charcoal blast furnace for smelting, I wouldn't be able to operate it alone.

With my heart pounding both in excitement and in worry, I crossed the kitchen and opened the last door.

Inside the room was everything you'd expect to be in a blacksmith's toolkit. There was a hammer and anvil, a small hearth for a crucible, and even a bloomery on a bed of charcoal for ironworking. I was equipped to make both Western and Japanese weapons from iron—or steel—along with small items like arrowheads. Thanks to the data installed in my brain earlier, I now knew how to use all the equipment. That headache had been a worthy price to pay.

A counter stood in the middle of the workshop, beyond which was a small open space. The door on the far wall with an elaborate latch led back outside.

"I see. This space doubles as a storefront for customers," I mused aloud.

The first set of rooms made up the living space, whereas this side of the cabin was pure business. If I'd forgotten to latch the front door to the living space before coming to the workshop, the clappers would alert me to any customer that tried to enter that way. The rope I saw earlier was also connected to the door in the workshop that led outside, so I would be alerted the other way around too. It was a simple but effective rig.

I took one last look around the workshop before returning to the living area. It didn't feel like home per se, but I couldn't return to my former world even if I wanted to. Besides, I didn't have any relatives or a girlfriend. The only person who would've been troubled by my death was my manager at work. But even at the company, I was easily replaceable—a cog in the machine—so maybe it didn't make a difference.

Either way, there was no turning back now.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. My stomach gurgled loudly, begging for food. I know that the body can't lie, but couldn't it have picked a better time? I sighed and went back into the kitchen to check on what food items had

been stocked. If only there were microwaveable meals...but I wouldn't count on it.

The pantry contained vegetables (mostly potatoes and the like) and smoked meat (pork, I thought), along with some legumes that looked like soybeans and lentils. A nearby jar was filled with cured meat, likely also pork.

I'll try making a stew. I filled a small pitcher with water from the large water jar and poured it into the pot situated on the charcoal stove. I thought I'd have to manually build a fire with the charcoal and kindling, but I wanted to give magic a go.

According to the installed data, there weren't any complex incantations for casting magic. Instead, I was meant to channel the motes of something or other—again, the data wasn't big on specific details—that danced in the air around me.

As I concentrated, my fingertips grew hot. It worked like an adiabatic compression system, similar to the ones used in diesel engines; I acted as the piston that compressed the gas in the cylinder. The temperature rose and rose, and then, *whoosh*, the flames blazed up in front of me. The fire soon gave off a warm glow and flickered merrily.

"Wow, I really did it," I said, touched by the proof of my accomplishment and the sensation of magic still burning on my fingertips. It was a completely novel experience for me, after all.

The Watchdog had said that I wouldn't have much magical ability, but this was certainly plenty for everyday life. While the idea of starting a fire from raw materials was romantic, using magic had been much less effort than using flint or generating heat through friction. There was a limit to what I could do though—I couldn't sustain the heat over long periods of time, so I could only ignite things that were easy to burn.

If lighting a fire was considered the bare minimum, maybe there was cold storage technology powered by cooling magic that existed in this world too. However, I hadn't seen anything like a fridge in the cabin. The vegetables I'd found were either dried or freshly harvested, and the meat was smoked or cured. I could've been wrong; maybe cooling magic didn't exist, or there was a

possibility that those items were a luxury, so they wouldn't be found out here in the middle of nowhere.

The water had come to a boil, so I added some diced cured pork, root vegetables, and soybeans. I kept the mixture on the heat while stirring it with a wooden ladle.

As the stew bubbled away, I returned to my thoughts. I could earn money through smithing, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to sell my products right away. And without an immediate source of income, I'd have to figure out a way to get more provisions before mine ran out. I needed water, ingredients, and seasonings, of which salt was particularly important since it could also be used as a preservative.

Before any of that though, I needed to find out more about my surroundings. I didn't even know if I'd woken up in the morning or afternoon. There may have been geographical data that came with the installation process, but even if I had a map, I wouldn't know where to start looking.

Where was this forest? How big was it, and what kind of place was it? Where was the nearest town? There were a whole slew of questions that needed answering if I was going to live here for several more decades.

I also wanted to know how frequently people passed through this forest—well, what I meant to say was, I wanted to know if this place was actually well-traveled.

The cabin was set up with the intention that customers would come here to shop. Of course, I had no idea when they would start coming, and it would look suspicious if I were to say that I'd been living alone in the forest this whole time. Especially if people passed frequently through these woods—how was I meant to explain the fact that this cabin had appeared out of the blue? I'd have to ask around if I ever made it into a town. My list of to-dos was growing long, though I suppose that was a natural consequence of moving to a new place.

The food finished cooking, and it smelled like stew at least. I took out a wooden bowl and spoon from the shelf and dished some out. I took a sip. It tasted exactly like what you'd expect a broth of cured pork, root vegetables, and soybeans to taste like—completely ordinary—but it wasn't half bad. At any

rate, my cooking was edible, so I could avoid a slow death by starvation. I had no problems with eating the same thing every day, at least for a while. Once I got sick of the taste, I'd figure something else out.

The sun was still high in the sky even after my meal. By my guess, it was no later than mid-afternoon, but it was hard to tell with all the trees surrounding the cabin. My body was also telling me that it wasn't going to get dark anytime soon. Since I felt alert and energetic, I decided to go out and explore again.

I was wearing a shirt and pants made of hemp fabric and a leather vest, like the stereotypical garb of an RPG villager. Though I didn't expect to run into anyone given how isolated this cabin was, if I did, I'd fit right in with these clothes. I carried a hunting knife with me that I'd found in the cabin and then set off, locking the door behind me.

I headed into the forest. Since there was plenty of sun and the trees were spaced out, it was still sunny underneath the canopy. "Even if it's light out now, I should still make sure to head back early," I said to myself as I carved an X into a nearby tree trunk to mark my path.

The first order of business was finding water. I thought I could search for two or three hours before getting tired, and if I hadn't located any by then, I'd come back.

The cabin receded quickly behind me, but from the implanted data, I still had a sense of where it was, unlike when I first woke up and couldn't navigate at all. It had taken some time for the downloaded info and experiences to sync up with my muscle memory.

I assumed that it was probably going to be the same with blacksmithing. I had no previous experience from my former life, so I had to rely solely on the data that came with the installation to this new life; that data had to be read in as I smithed. I knew that the discrepancy between the knowledge base and my physical memory would disappear over time. In any case, I wasn't particularly worried.

As I walked, new bits of info about the flora and fauna and sense memory were gradually coming to me. Even so, I was still marking the tree trunks as I went, on the off chance that my new knowledge would desert me at an

inopportune time, leaving me stranded in the forest. I was also pocketing herbs I came across that had medicinal effects, like fever reducers or antiseptics, since I hadn't found any in the cabin. Judging from the abundance of useful herbs here, this world was looking like a pretty good place to live.

I'd been wandering for an hour or so when I finally found my precious water source. I heard the sound of running water and rushed toward it, emerging on the shores of a lake. Upstream, I could see the mouth of the river that fed into it. This lake was so wide that the opposite shore disappeared beyond the horizon.

Since I'd been collecting herbs along the way, it'd taken an hour to find this water source, but it was actually only fifteen minutes away from my cabin. This was the solution to my water problems. I might have to make multiple trips a day, but it would be perfect exercise after being cooped up in the workshop for hours. I would incorporate it into my routine starting tomorrow.

I peered at my reflection in the water. The ripples made it hard to tell, but my reflection looked thirty years old, as I had requested. I'd figured that twenty would've been unbelievably young to be an accomplished blacksmith, which was what I'd asked to be, and what the data and experiences that came with the install now pointed to. No one would've believed in the abilities of someone so young, especially considering that I was a stranger to the area.

My internal clock told me that there was still some time before sunset. I ambled along the shore, looking around at the forest and lake, and I made a couple of discoveries. First, there were shrubs growing fruits that looked like raspberries. In the boughs of the trees, there were apple look-alikes too. According to the data, they were both edible, so I picked one apple doppelganger from the tree. It certainly smelled like an apple.

I tentatively took a bite. "This is so sour!" I exclaimed.

Though it had a trace of apple flavor, it was extremely acidic. It wasn't quite as sour as apple vinegar, but it was a no-go for anyone who disliked sour food. What a frightening fruit! The farmers in my previous world worked hard to grow sweet, juicy apples, and their efforts had really *borne fruit*, pun intended. In any

case, I hadn't brought anything to carry the fruits in, and I still had some food stockpiled. I'd come back another day to gather some.

I turned away to look toward the lake again. The flowing waters suggested that there may have been a mountain nearby; perhaps it was the source of the river and the place where the water drained from, but I couldn't see anything from where I was standing. I spied some fish swimming in the crystal clear waters and vowed that next time, I'd come with a rod and bait to try to catch some. Hopefully, I'd have time once I started working as a blacksmith—I'd be spending most of the day in the workshop since smithing was going to be my livelihood. Well, I could always decide on fixed hours and then go fishing on my days off.

I was done being a workaholic. I wanted to live a slow, quiet life.

I puttered around for a while longer before my internal clock said it was getting late. It was time to go back...or so I'd decided when I suddenly saw movement in the grass. Looking closely, I saw a large animal around 150 centimeters long, almost the size of a human adult. I approached it cautiously.

It was hidden in the shadows, so I couldn't see it clearly, but I noticed that it had triangular ears like a cat or a dog. However, its silhouette looked almost human. Its shoulders heaved up and down and I quickened my steps. It could definitely hear me approaching, but its breathing was ragged and it didn't move a muscle aside from its shoulders.

Only when I came within touching distance did I realize what the animal was. Maybe it was rude to call it—*her*—an animal. She must've been one of the beastfolk. She had a tiger-like tail and ears along with striped fur on her hands and feet, but she looked human otherwise. Light leather armor protected her torso. She was carrying a bow slung over her shoulder and a quiver down by her waist, but maybe she'd not had a chance to use them during her last tussle.

Painful-looking wounds covered her body. She had collapsed facedown, but I could see that her armor was torn at the sides, and the exposed skin was bruised and bloody. While the wound wasn't bleeding profusely, it was obviously severe. I didn't need the data to tell me that much.

“I have to get her somewhere safe as soon as possible.”

I turned her over and lifted her up. Her armor wasn't as secure as I'd thought because her surprisingly ample breasts spilled out over the top of the leather. I was shocked, but there was no time to stop and stare. I just filed the image away and hefted her body over my shoulder in a so-called fireman's carry. She was lighter than she looked.

“It'd be more chivalrous to carry her like a princess, but this is faster,” I remarked. “It'll have to do. Sorry.”

Carrying the half-tiger girl, I rushed back home. I'd walked a ways along the shore of the lake, so it took longer to get home than the fifteen minutes I'd initially estimated. She was fading fast, but her body still contained warmth. I clung to the hope that I'd make it back in time.

When we got to the cabin, I had to set her down so that I could unlock the door. The muffled clatter from the workshop side reached my ears. I hurried to the bedroom, and after scrounging around, I found some extra sheets in the cupboard. I grabbed two, returned to the living room, and put them on the table. Then I headed into the workshop, where I was able to find a needle, thread, and knife. The former two were for stitching together scabbards and the latter was merchandise, but this wasn't the time to be picky.

I had everything I needed.

In the kitchen, I put the needle into a pot of water and lit the fire. While waiting, I spread one of the sheets over the table in the living room. The girl was still lying unconscious on her side where I left her. I carried her into the cabin and laid her down on the table, then latched the door so I wouldn't be disturbed by any visitors, though it wasn't likely anyway.

I removed her bow, quiver, and wrist guards—they looked like archer's gloves—and set them aside. I also removed her armor...well, it was really just a breastplate. Her shirt was wet and sticky with blood, so I cut it down the middle and took it off.

First, I checked to make sure she had no serious wounds other than the one on her side. It was hard to tell if her hands and feet were injured because of the

fur. Although, if I could've seen a wound even through the fur, then it would've been a serious gash. I took the lack of visible trauma as a good sign. She had cuts and scrapes all over her body, but only the oozing opening in her side needed immediate attention. Fresh blood welled up at the site of injury. She didn't seem conscious, but her face had been screwed tight with pain this entire time.

The water had come to a boil. I cut out a piece of the extra sheet and placed it in the water to disinfect. After a while, I took it out and brought it to the table, along with the needle and thread.

"The data really comes in handy at times like this," I said. So far, everything I'd done had been informed by some knowledge from my previous life, alongside the helpful data. However, for the next steps, I had no real-world experience—only the data could see me through.

I wiped down the wound with the disinfected sheet. The young woman grunted and her face tightened with pain, but she was still unconscious. Blood was welling up again, so I had to stitch the wound quickly. And since I didn't have any anesthetic, this was going to hurt her. Every time the needle passed through her skin, her jaw clenched. My chest tightened with guilt, but I had to keep going for her sake.

At last, I was able to suture the wound closed. It was nowhere near as neat as a surgeon's stitching, but since my installation had come with some basic survival skills, it had come out all right. The job may have been ugly, but at least it would prevent the gash from getting worse. If she complained about its appearance later, I'd take it in stride and apologize.

Again, I soaked the sheet I'd used to clean the wound and then used it to wipe down the rest of her body, double-checking for any serious injuries. It was awkward to say the least because she was completely naked. Fortunately, both my mind and body understood the severity of the situation, so I finished without embarrassing myself.

I extinguished the fire and filled a wooden bowl halfway with the hot water, then soaked some of the fever-relieving herbs I'd gathered earlier. After a while, the brew started to give off a crisp, minty scent. I fed the girl the

medicine after making sure it was cool enough to drink. When I spooned the liquid into her mouth, she drank it down herself. It was lucky that she wasn't completely unresponsive. The bowl was soon empty, and since the herb was a fever-reducer, I hoped that it would have some pain-relieving effects as well.

She didn't miraculously recover, but after an hour her breathing evened out. I tried moving her because the table was no place for a patient. I carried her princess-style, this time into the bedroom, and laid her down on the bed. Of course, I made sure to cover her with a kakebuton (or a blanket, I should say, to match with this world's Western-style culture). She was sleeping soundly. I hadn't noticed before now, but on her head, a stylish green hair ornament glittered in the light.

I sighed deeply, feeling completely drained. The first aid itself had been exhausting, but more than that, maintaining that level of concentration had really done me in. Between scouting my surroundings earlier and rescuing the girl, it had been a long day. I decided that I should eat dinner, but I needed a break first, so I sat down on the stool by the nightstand.

"Tomorrow, I'll go replenish my water supply and then try my hand at smithing. I'll also need to check in on her once in a while," I said.

Thinking had made me sleepy and sitting down had only made my tiredness more pronounced. My head drooped, and I jerked it back up. This was a familiar feeling from my old world—I was starting to nod off.

"No...I have to...make dinner..." I mumbled, but it was no use. I slipped off into the welcoming darkness.

I was stirred from sleep by a strange feeling around my neck. How long had I been unconscious? And how was the girl doing? I opened my eyes, still out of it, to the sight of her—she was hovering over me and gripping my throat with one hand.

"Well, I thought it might turn out this way," I said as calmly as I could manage. Her grasp was light, but it didn't escape me that she could've easily ended my second life while I'd been asleep and before I'd spent even a full day here.

“How are your injuries?” I asked.

She stared at me. Her eyes were a beautiful golden color, just like a tiger's. At first, she looked confused by my question, but she soon schooled her features into impassivity. “They hurt,” she responded, “but they're healing.”

“That's good,” I said, smiling with genuine relief. My efforts to save her hadn't been in vain.

“Right...” she said with trepidation. That was my chance to push her off and free myself, but I didn't want to risk upsetting her. She quickly recovered from her lapse. “Did you look?” she said, anger coloring her voice. She tightened her hold.

“Only because I had to treat you, and I didn't touch you except for when it was medically necessary. I promise,” I stated, making sure to keep my voice level.

“Are you telling the truth?”

“If I lied, you can wring my neck.”

She locked her gaze with mine. After a few seconds of intense eye contact, she sighed and released my neck. “I'll believe you for now.”

“Thank you.”

“Humans give off a distinct scent when they lie,” she added. “You don't smell that way.”

“You can tell if I'm lying just by how I smell?!”

“Yeah, but only when humans are rattled. Canine and lupine beastfolk, on the other hand, can smell lies any time.”

I nodded. If I had felt her up while treating her and lied about it, she would've seen through me and killed me on the spot. It was only my second day here and I was already on thin ice.

I got up and rummaged through my belongings, pulled out a change of clothing, and handed it to her. “Put these on for now,” I instructed.

“What about my clothes?” she asked.

"I had to cut them off to get to your wounds. Plus, they were soaked with blood. It's probably best to throw them out."

"Oh...I see."

"I'm sorry if they were important to you."

"No, not at all. Just scraps," she said before starting to change.

She'd been naked up until now, but for what it was worth, I turned away to give her some privacy. For a space currently occupied by two people, it sure was quiet. The only sound was the rustle of the clothing.

"Do you own this cabin?"

"Yes," I said, turning to face her again since she'd finished changing.

"What are you doing all the way out here?"

"I'm a blacksmith."

"Blacksmith?" she asked.

"Well...I just moved in yesterday." I'd waffled on how to explain my living situation, but ultimately, I decided to stick with the truth. There was a good chance that she knew this area, and I didn't want to make her suspicious by saying anything careless.

"Was this cabin always here?"

Bingo! She knew where we were.

"It was here when I got here," I replied. That was true, except for the part where it'd appeared out of thin air.

"I'm not in this part of the Black Forest often, so I probably just missed it before."

The Black Forest. I had seen this name in the geography data that'd been installed in my mind. Though I was trying to keep a poker face, on the inside, I was jumping for joy; I didn't want her super senses to detect anything. If I combined the data with what I'd seen while walking around yesterday, I could guess our location. Was it around...here?

"Right now, we're in the eastern part of the forest," I hazarded.

“Oh, I mostly roam and sleep in the north and west. I rarely come here.”

Phew. I didn't know our exact coordinates, but at least I got the general area correct.

She continued her explanation. “As soon as I ventured this way, I ran into a black bear, and well...you can guess what happened. The only reason it didn't kill me was because it sensed you approaching, I think.”

“I see.” Something vicious enough to take her down lived here? In this forest, she was likely considered a strong predator herself. Besides the fact that she was part tiger, she must've been strong since she wandered around the woods all by herself. However, she was injured right now.

I didn't want to turn her out, so I said, “I have a proposal for you.”

“What?”

“Well, it'll take time for your injuries to heal, right?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Beastfolk are sturdier than humans, but a wound this large will take time to heal. I won't be able to hunt or gather food for two weeks.”

“Why don't you live here then?” I offered.

“Huh?”

“I don't mean anything strange by it. It's just mutually beneficial,” I reasoned. “I'm new to the area, and I'll need some help with my smithing. You need to heal, and even after you've recovered, you'll still need some time to adjust, right?”

“True.”

“You'll be more comfortable here. At least, you won't have to worry about rain. I'll bet it's hard to hunt during a storm.”

“Makes sense,” she said and paused to think.

As she considered my offer, her softly pointed ears swiveled in different directions, and I was mesmerized. I could look at her tiger features all day. I didn't say that to her though—I figured she'd be outraged.

“All right. I’ll stay here until my injuries are healed and I can move normally again. When that time comes, I’ll consider what I want to do long-term. How’s that?” she asked.

“Works for me,” I said.

“Cool. Let’s get along then!”

“Great!”

I’d said that I wanted to live with a cat, but never in my wildest dreams had I thought that this was how my wish would be interpreted. I supposed a tiger girl counted. *Watchdog, was this your answer to my request?* I asked her in my head, but there was no response. Not that I’d expected one.

“By the way, what’s your name?” I asked.

“Samya.”

So her name was Samya. “Nice name,” I said, but she didn’t respond. “What’s wrong?” I finally asked.

“It’s too cute. I’d rather be called something that sounds tough.”

“Umm...like González?”

“Pft—” The sound burst out of her. A second later, she was rolling on the bed, cracking up. “Ha ha ha ha! González! Your naming sense is horrible! Ha ha ha!!!”

“Stuff it. At least my parents gave me common sense,” I said, disheartened by her jeering. She was laughing so hard that she was crying.



In the four decades of my first life, my bad naming sense was the only weakness I hadn't gotten a chance to rid myself of. I should've had the Watchdog fix it, but it was too late to be remembering that now.

"Even if you don't like your name, your family gave it to you," I said after Samya recovered from her fit of laughter. "Besides, I think it suits you."

"Oh, um, thanks," she replied. Back in Japan, there was a saying: "the crying crow is already laughing." In this case though, "the laughing tiger is already bashful" would be more accurate. Basically, it meant that a person's moods are quick to change.

"All right, I'm going to go refill our water supply. It's a ways from the cabin. Will you be okay by yourself?" I asked.

"Before you go..." She trailed off.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"Oh. Right. I'm Eizo Tanya." Eizo was my given name, though in my old life I'd introduced myself the other way around.

"It sounds Nordic. You have a family name and everything."

"If you say so."

According to the geographic data, in this world, the region similar to Asia was in the north, not the east. The people who lived there were called the Nordic people.

"My bad, I didn't mean to pry. Family names are rare here."

"It's okay. Don't worry about it," I said. "I suppose you've already guessed why I'm setting up my workshop in an isolated place like this."

In this world, it was rare for a man with a family name—in other words, a man from an established family line—to move to another region of the world, and to work as a blacksmith in a remote forest no less. It was unthinkable for someone of such status to choose the life of a recluse for themselves. Samya had connected the dots and drawn her own conclusions about my background.

“Looks like you’ve got it rough too,” Samya said in camaraderie.

“I’m doing all right for myself.” *For now, at least.* “Can you help me out and only use my first name?”

“No problem, Eizo.”

“Thanks, Samya.”

I left Samya to rest in bed so I could go fetch water. It was a vital commodity since it was the foundation of all life. I planned to go back to the lake with two empty medium-sized water jugs I’d found in the cabin. They hung from both ends of a shoulder pole and had ropes threaded into their mouths for easy carry.

“They look pretty heavy,” I mumbled, but this was a necessary task to pave the way for a slow life. I could’ve gotten Samya to help me, but she’d be annoyed if she wasn’t able to lift them. So, I steeled myself and hefted the carrying pole onto my shoulders.

Contrary to my expectations, the jugs were light. Not light as a feather, per se, but about the same weight as a large plastic bucket from my old world. What kind of ceramic were these made of?

“Wait, that’s not it...”

The jugs weren’t light; I was just strong. Had the Watchdog judged this to be the minimum amount of strength I’d need to survive in this world, or maybe...? I left that question for another time. Right now, I had to retrieve water, so I headed out to the lake.

The trip took about thirty minutes from start to finish between travel time and filling the jugs. I’d be coming back every day from now on. The containers never became too heavy for me to carry, despite their volume. There was no doubt that I could lift more than before.

When I returned to the cabin, I ate a breakfast of tofu and cured meat soup with Samya. Afterward, I ushered her back to the bedroom for rest and recovery, before turning to the workshop.

There, I found the answer as to why I was now so strong.

I thought about what I should try to smith first and settled on a small knife. A larger project would've taken more time, and my muscle memory needed the opportunity to sync up with the installed blacksmithing data and experiences. I figured I should start with a series of small items.

"But before that, I need a bit of magic," I said. I conjured fire to light the hearth, and the forge readily responded to the magic. The bed of charcoal started to smolder and a deep red light glowed from between pieces of coal. I knew that the forge would automatically circulate the flames I'd produced in order to maintain a stable temperature throughout the hearth, but I didn't know exactly how it worked. As expected of a magical item, I suppose. Thank god I didn't have to build the fire from scratch.

With the forge going, I directed my magic toward the bellows. I pictured myself pumping power through my body and summoned a wind that blew out of my palms. It was just a momentary breeze, nothing so powerful as to blow a person away. Like the forge, the bellows took up the thread of my magic and started to work—it used my wind as fuel without needing any more manual intervention from me.

I manipulated my magic and worked the forge and bellows to slowly raise the temperature of the fire hotter and hotter. I was planning to use the four-centimeters-wide by one-centimeter-thick iron bands from the raw material storage. I guessed they'd been provided as freebies. I picked one up with the tongs and thrust it into the firepot.

"I thought I was prepared, but it's really sweltering in here," I said to myself.

At 800°C, the iron began to change color. It needed to be even hotter before it became malleable though, so it was only natural that the air near the forge was scorching. I was dripping with sweat, so I removed my leather vest. However, I kept on the hemp shirt to protect myself from stray sparks.

Using the bellows, I stoked the fire to raise the temperature even higher, hot enough to heat the iron. When the metal had reached the perfect temperature, I took it out and began to strike it with the hammer. At that moment, I realized how much muscle you needed as a blacksmith.

“I get it now,” I said with a grin on my face. Sparks leaped into the air from the force of my strikes as I shaped the iron. It was exactly like how it was depicted in the videos I’d used to watch in my previous life. What a thrill to experience it for myself! I was aiming for the shape of a Japanese sword, but I wouldn’t try to make it quite as delicate. When the iron was roughly the correct shape, I left it to cool while I ate lunch.

As Samya and I ate, I asked her if there were any cities nearby. She told me there was one that was a quarter of a day’s journey away, though she rarely left the forest herself. A round trip was technically doable in one day but would be no walk in the park.

After lunch, I forced Samya back to bed for more rest and returned to work. By the time I got back, the fire had died down and cooled significantly. I fed it more charcoal to raise the temperature again, which was something I still had to do manually.

By now, I was at the tail end of the forging process. Japanese swordsmiths traditionally worked at night so they could pinpoint the exact temperature of the fire by its color. However, since my smithing skills were cheats, I could discern the temperature even when it was still bright outside. Once the blade had heated to the right temperature, I went to quench it in cold water to harden the metal. For my first time around, I wanted the edge and back of the blade to harden evenly, so I didn’t coat any parts of it with clay like I would’ve for selective quenching.

When I plunged the knife into the water, a loud hiss filled the room. It was similar to the sound produced by a hot skillet being submerged in water, but several times louder. I could feel the knife cooling in my hand, and after a while, I lifted it back out. A light vapor coiled around the metal. For the finishing touch, I sharpened the blade on a whetstone.

My workshop’s inaugural item was now complete. I hadn’t planned to use it for anything specific, so I hadn’t made a hilt with a guard and I’d left the grip untempered. I would have to wrap it with cord before using it, but the important thing was that I’d finished it.

Next, I wanted to test the sharpness of the blade. Even though I didn't have a specific use for it, I still wanted to make sure that it cut through things—that was the whole point of a knife after all. I grabbed a log as a makeshift counter and set a bundle of straw on top of it.

I slashed the knife down toward it.

The straw bundle split apart...along with the log.

Huh?! What the hell just happened?

The knife I'd made *as a test* sliced all the way through a log?! That was a little...no, very hard to accept. It was my first knife! Sure, my skills came from a cheat, and admittedly, I'd put in extra effort for my first project, but even so, this outcome was hard to swallow. The knife seemed almost like a magical item. In fact, it was probably *too* sharp; it could really hurt someone.

What if it wasn't my knife-making skills but my knife-wielding skills that were top-notch?

I had to experiment to find out.

I retrieved the knife I'd used to cut Samya's clothing yesterday and tested it on the same straw-and-log setup. That blade made a clean cut through the straw, but the log was undamaged. My new body did seem to possess some degree of swordsmanship—or should I say knifemanship?—but this was proof that the knife I'd crafted really was of a different caliber.

Back on Earth, we would call this situation “using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.” No one in their right mind was going to buy a knife that would slice through the cutting board along with their meat. However, the knife had potential as a weapon. Normal knives were only effective against an opponent without any armor—most couldn't even cut through leather. My knife would have no problem against leather, though metal might be enough to stop it.

Anyway, I hadn't been planning to sell this knife. It had turned out better than I'd anticipated, but I'd made it as a trial product and it was on the smaller side. I decided to keep it for self-defense.

I made a scabbard for the knife out of the log I'd accidentally split. I cut two planks from the log, which were about the thickness of the knife and slightly

larger in shape. I carved out the centers, glued the two sides together, and fitted a leather piece over the mouth. It was a simple sheath, but now I could carry the knife around with me.

Onto the next experiment—my goal was to test and see if everything I made would be this high quality. *Please let the answer be no.*

I decided to make three knives slightly larger than the one I'd just finished, about the size of a survival knife. However, I would put in different amounts of effort. The first I'd make with the same effort as my other knife; on the second, I'd cut some corners; for the third, I'd slack off completely. I grabbed three sheets of metal, lit the furnace, and set to work.

The three knives took me the rest of the day to shape. I opted to finish and test them in the morning. It was now time to wake Samya up from her medically prescribed nap.

"Hey, it's time for dinner," I said. "Get up!"

She moaned and turned over in bed, rustling the sheets. Her voice sounded somewhat erotic.

"Sleep is important, but so is food! You won't heal if you don't eat. Come on, wake up."

I tore the covers off her and was treated to the sight of a completely naked Samya. So she was the type to sleep without clothing... Whoops. I'd be more careful next time.

She sat up groggily. "When did it get so late? And why do I still feel so tired? I've literally been asleep all day."

"That's only natural after a serious injury. It's your body's survival mechanism to conserve energy and prevent excess movement while the body heals and replenishes the lost blood," I responded.

"Whoa, you're a walking encyclopedia."

"Nothing like that." It was just the combined knowledge I had from two separate worlds.

The room had grown dark, so I picked up a lantern. It was my first time using it because yesterday I'd fallen asleep too early to need it. Luckily, it was a magical item too, so I could light it with my bottom-of-the-barrel abilities—all I had to do was focus my energy. After a moment, the magic sparked out of me and into the lantern. Fire magic, along with wind magic, made up the extent of my primary magical abilities.

"You can do magic too?!" Samya exclaimed.

"Only simple things," I said.

"The old families are something else..." she said with awe. Even having the bare minimum in magical ability was rare. I wasn't sure how prolific magic was, but I knew that the large majority of people couldn't use it.

We moved to the living room to eat dinner. I added some root vegetables to the leftover soup from breakfast and heated it up. Feeding an extra mouth cut into the food supply, but there was still quite a lot left. Of course, it wouldn't last more than a month or two. I'd have to figure out how to make money before the food ran out, either by selling my wares in the nearest city or offering repair services. Though, I didn't want to travel before Samya was healed. I wouldn't be able to sleep if something happened to her while I was gone, especially since I'd already saved her life once.

We made small talk as we ate. Both of us instinctively avoided discussing our pasts. She told me about her day-to-day life, and I reminisced about the scenery back on Earth. I used to be so moved when I saw the towering mountains with their everlasting snowy peaks. That kind of info wasn't going to give anything important away.

After dinner, we parted ways for bed. I ended up sleeping at the desk in the study, but I was used to that from my programming job anyway. Samya had insisted that she should be the one to sleep in the study, but I put my foot down. She was still healing. End of discussion.

She'd reluctantly retired to the bedroom, and thus my second day came to an end.

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The next morning passed in much the same way. I woke up, made breakfast, and roused Samya to eat. I heated a batch of water for Samya to wipe herself down with, then I headed out to the lake for more.

When I got to the shore, I figured that I should take a dip. I jumped into the lake, water splashing up around me.

“Eyahhh!” I shouted in shock after resurfacing. The water was so much colder than I’d expected—it was practically freezing! But in a way, it was refreshing, especially after a whole day of sweating in the workshop. Once I felt sufficiently clean, I went back to the cabin with the filled water jugs.

The first order of business was to finish up my three-knife experiment. I continued where I’d left off and heated the knives to the right temperature. I quickly quenched them to set their shape, sharpened their edges minimally, and wrapped their handles with leather cord. I made sure to vary my effort for each knife, the same as when I’d shaped them the day before.

By the time I was finished, it was already noon. Perfect timing. I’d ask Samya to help me with the rest of the experiment over lunch.

“Samya, can you give me some help after we eat?” I asked.

“Sure,” she agreed easily, “but I don’t know anything about blacksmithing.”

“That’s fine. I just need another set of hands,” I said.

“All right. I spent the entire day in bed yesterday, so I’ve got plenty of energy.”

“I appreciate it.”

After we’d finished eating, we went into the workshop together, and I explained the setup. “I’ve prepared three knives. Can you cut these straw bundles with them, starting with the one on the right? I’m trying to test how sharp they are.”

I wanted to isolate the variables to the cutting ability of the knives, and I didn’t want any sword skills I’d been gifted with to interfere. If the blade I’d worked the hardest on sliced through the wood with Samya wielding it, then I could be sure that it was due to the quality of the knife.

“Okay. Easy,” she said.

Samya sat down on the work stool (read: tree stump) and placed the first straw bundle onto the log counter. She picked up the right-most knife—the one I’d put the least effort into—and swung it down with gusto. The bundle fell apart, accompanied by the soft crinkling sound of the straw falling down. However, that knife barely scratched the log and had only cut through the straw.

“Wow, amazing!” she exclaimed. “You’ve got skills, Eizo!”

“Thanks,” I replied. “Now try the middle one.”

“You got it,” she said, pumped up now. She selected the next knife, the so-so one, in high spirits. When she slashed through a new bundle, the straw fell apart again with a gentle rustle. This knife also bit deep into the log but didn’t split it all the way through.

“Hmmm, not bad,” I remarked.

“Not bad? What’re you talking about? It’s incredible!!!”

I was relieved by Samya’s enthusiasm. Judging by her reaction, I didn’t need to go all-out when smithing. A middling amount of effort was perfectly sufficient. I was also genuinely happy to hear her compliments, but I put on a poker face because I didn’t want to trigger her sharp senses.

“Try the last one,” I said.

“Oh, okay. Sure.” Her excitement faltered against my cool facade. She lifted the knife that I’d worked seriously on and sliced through the last straw bundle.

The knife had sunk halfway through the log, but this time, there was no rustle from the straw. It was completely silent.

“Huh?” Samya said, bewildered.

“Pull the knife out,” I instructed.

“R-Right.” When she raised the knife, the halves of the bundle and log slid apart slowly. It was like a scene straight out of a manga or anime. “Wh-What just happened?”

“Calm down,” I said. “It’s dangerous for you to panic right now.”

She broke out of her spell and looked over toward me. “Ah, r-right. Y-You’re right,” she stammered. “My bad...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I didn’t explain beforehand,” I replied. Of course, anyone would be shocked to see a knife cleave a log in two. I would’ve been stunned too, had I not suspected what would happen beforehand.

These results confirmed my hypothesis: the cheat had given me top-tier blacksmith skills and the ability to make first-class items.

“Well, I suppose I won’t be able to sell the third knife,” I said.

“What? Why?” Samya said, shocked.

“Maybe if it were to a swordsman, but otherwise, this knife is too dangerous to sell to a normal person,” I said. “Think about it—what if I sold it to a perfectly average family, and one day, the mom’s hand slips while she’s prepping dinner? She might lose a finger.”

People around here didn’t use cutting boards either. Instead, they sliced vegetables and meat held straight in their hands. Cutting boards were more common up north apparently.

“Oh, that’s true,” she said. She looked disappointed.

“But I guess it wouldn’t hurt to sell it to someone who knew their way around a sword,” I said.

“Why don’t you give it to me?”

“Really?” I asked. “You want it?”

“Y-Yeah. When I’m hunting, it would make skinning and cleaning animals a lot easier.”

“All right then. It’s yours.” I already had the first knife I’d made. Besides, it’d be a shame for this knife to go to waste, and I’d rather Samya have it than a stranger.

“Are you sure?!”

“Yeah, I don’t mind, but you’ll have to wait a bit,” I said. “I’ll make a scabbard

for it when I have some time between making items to sell.”

“Awesome! I’m not complaining—I know a good deal when I see one!”

“Okay, I’ll have it back to you soon.”

“Woohoo!”

It was almost like trying to tame a wild animal with food. Not almost... She was already living here, so I was well into that process already.

In any case, after seeing the results of my experiment, I now knew what direction I should take my smithing in; rather than making anything extraordinary, I’d focus on creating everyday items. I could take my time, make things over two or three days, and accept repair work here and there as well. Quantity over quality. Of course, I wasn’t going to ignore quality completely. I wanted customers to come away satisfied, so I’d make sure all the blades and tools that I forged were sharper than average.

For the next four days, I churned out a series of knives and shortswords, along with hoes, sickles, and axes. I didn’t have to spend much time on them at all; speed might’ve been part of the cheat, or maybe it was a side effect of not having to put in much effort. I forged some high-caliber items for my own use, but for the most part, I was only aiming for above-average quality.

While I worked, Samya rested obediently. She avoided moving around too much, and even when she helped me with my sharpness experiments, she took it easy and didn’t use much power. Or had she gotten weak from the lack of exercise?

Out of curiosity, I asked her about it, and she replied, “The faster I get better, the faster I get to play around with your knives.”

I’d have to make something nice next time, so I wouldn’t let her down. Besides, I was a sucker for compliments, even roundabout ones.

The next morning, Samya and I were eating together as usual. Today, however, I had a big announcement to make.

“I’ve decided to take a break today!” I burst out.

“Uh, okay,” Samya said, turned off by my enthusiasm.

It was my first holiday here in this world! It hadn’t even been a full week, but the idea of a holiday itself was novel to me. I’d barely taken any time off in my previous job. Once, I’d even worked forty-five days straight with no weekends or vacations. A little while before I’d come to this world, my company had finally stopped making us do dangerous levels of overtime, but that hadn’t been out of concern for the well-being of the employees—it had simply been to avoid legal liabilities.

In this world, I was no longer beholden to a working schedule of five business days a week. I could take breaks whenever I wanted! As a bonus, I didn’t have to worry about using up my paid vacation days. So who cares if Samya thought I was weird? With these perks, I would’ve been crazy not to get excited.

I had a plan in mind for the day, but I didn’t want to push Samya too hard since she still had her stitches in. I asked for her opinion. “I wanted to do some exploring nearby. Do you feel up to it?”

“Sure, I think I can manage that, but...”

“But...? Is there something you’re worried about?” I asked.

“We’re still in *its* territory. My injuries are healing, but there’s always a chance we could get attacked again.” She spoke quieter than usual.

Was that bear still roaming around the area? That would be dangerous indeed.

“We’ll turn right around at the first sign of danger,” I promised. “I just want to get to know our surroundings better. I’m clueless as a baby right now.”

“All right,” she said. “I’m sold.”

“It’s settled then.”

“Roger that.”

After breakfast, I made sandwiches for us to bring along. I’d baked some flatbread before, using a simple dough mix of only flour, salt, and water. For the filling, I’d used smoked pork chops that I’d already stewed. That might sound

fancy, but it was really just the leftover meat from the soup we'd eaten for breakfast. The pork was lightly flavored with the root vegetable broth it had been stewed in.

Like every other meat we'd had, it was primarily seasoned with salt. At this point, salt was becoming pretty unappetizing; I definitely wanted to buy other kinds of seasoning when I journeyed to the city. There was likely pepper at least. Since the Nordic region was similar to Asia, maybe I could even find miso, soy sauce, and fish sauce. Would these ingredients be available in markets down here? *Well, I shouldn't get my hopes up.*

I placed the sandwiches into a knapsack, but I figured that if we came back early, we could always eat them here too.

Before leaving, we both strapped knives around our waists. I considered bringing a shortsword, but decided against it in the end—it didn't seem like it'd be useful if we ran into the bear. Rather than standing my ground and drawing my sword against that beast, it would be better to run.

When we left, I closed and locked the door behind us. It was unlikely that a petty thief would be slinking around a random cabin in the middle of the forest, but it was better safe than sorry. I hadn't left the house vacant since the first day, so I wanted to be careful.

We headed into the forest, in the opposite direction of where I'd first found Samya, moving through the dense and lush greenery. This forest was home to a variety of animals. Other than the squirrel-like animal I'd seen and the bear that'd attacked Samya, there were also deer, boar, and wolves. The deer were docile, but the other two we'd have to watch out for.

I warned Samya as well, but she only looked confused. Finally, she said, "Why would we have to worry about boar and wolves?"

"Um, why wouldn't we?" I asked the obvious.

She still looked perplexed. "You're strong, aren't you, Eizo?"

"Strong enough to survive in this forest...I think," I said. To be honest, I wasn't exactly sure if I was a good fighter or not. The Watchdog would've made me strong enough that I wouldn't be killed immediately, but past that, I had no

idea.

“Since you decided to move here, you must be strong,” she declared. “The wolves around here are cutthroat and will strike at the first sign of fragility. The weak have been long eaten up.” She spoke nonchalantly as if we were discussing the weather.

So if I’d been weak, I would’ve been killed already when I’d been stumbling around the forest on the first day, or when I’d gone down to the lake for water.

Thank you, Watchdog, for making sure death by wolves wasn’t in my cards!

We continued chatting as we wandered deeper into the forest. Today was sunny, and the light filtering through the canopy of trees overhead spotlighted the mossy undergrowth. Occasionally, we’d hear rustling noises, but they’d stop soon after. According to Samya, they were the sounds of small animals scampering around us.

We wouldn’t run into any bigger animals unless we went searching for them ourselves. “Large animals are generally sharp and intelligent,” she’d said. Apparently, the proverb “big head, little wit” did not apply in this situation. She’d piqued my interest, so now I wanted to meet a wolf or something—but of course, I didn’t want to put us in danger. I hadn’t brought my sword and I wasn’t prepared for a fight, so I reined in my curiosity.

When I asked how she could tell that they were small animals, she said she could detect them by their scents. Her sense of smell from her tiger half was miles better than that of humans and other human-like races. She’d said previously that canine and lupine beastfolk had even better noses, but from my perspective, her nose was plenty powerful, given that she could identify mood swings just by a person’s aroma.

After roaming around for a while, my stomach started grumbling about how desperately empty it was. Gotta love that internal clock.

“Do you want to eat?” I asked.

“Sure,” Samya said.

She quickly found a small glade for us. It was about the size of two picnic

blankets, nowhere near as large as the clearing where the cabin was located. We sat down on the ground, and I took the sandwiches out of the sack. I passed one over to Samya and then started eating. It didn't taste quite like I'd imagined, but it was delicious.

"Pretty tasty," Samya said.

"It's probably just because we haven't eaten since morning." *Hunger is the best seasoning after all*, or so the saying goes. Then, I took the chance to ask Samya something that had been on my mind for a while now. "What did you eat when you were on your own?"

"Mostly jerky," she said.

"Ah, that makes sense." Jerky was no-fuss and a good source of sodium. It was also easy to eat on the go while hunting. "You're not used to cooked meals then?"

"I'm not used to them, no, but this kind of food is nice too."

"Good." I'd been worried that the food I'd made wasn't to her tastes, or perhaps that the change in cuisine would be hard on her digestion. Her answer took a load off my mind. In fact, I realized that I should've asked her earlier.

After wandering around some more, we concluded that the area surrounding the cabin was safe, almost unusually so. Samya said she hadn't spotted any footprints or other evidence that wild beasts were about. She was a natural-born hunter, so I trusted her instincts. I assumed that the Watchdog must've provided a secure home for me—it would've been a waste of time and effort to reincarnate me, only for me to die immediately.

Since Samya was still healing, we didn't try to hunt any of the critters roaming around in the forest. Instead, we gathered some fever-reducing and antiseptic herbs and then headed home for the day.

###

On the sixth day, a little short of a full week since I'd arrived, I decided that it was time to remove the stitches from Samya's side.

"I'm starting. It'll hurt," I warned her.

“Okay, got it,” she said. As I removed the thread, her expression grew pained, but she bore it in silence.

“Aaand we’re done.”

“Ouuuch,” she said. “But thanks.”

I wrapped the wound in fresh bandages, and Samya stroked it lightly, feeling the marks the sutures had left.

“One more thing, Samya,” I said.

“What’s up?”

“Are beastfolk welcome in cities?”

“Yeah? I rarely have business there so I don’t go very often, but it’s not a crime. Soldiers don’t come stomping out to capture me, and shopkeepers don’t mark up the prices just because I’m part tiger, you know.”

“That’s good.”

“Why?”

“I was thinking of checking out the city tomorrow,” I explained. “I don’t know the way, so I could use an escort. I thought it’d be a good chance for you to move around some more as well. Two birds, one stone, and all that. It’d be a big help if you were to go with me.”

“Sure, why not?” she agreed.

“That was easy.”

“You’ve been taking care of me all this time, so it’s my turn to repay the favor.”

“Thank you.”

“No worries,” she said. “I’ll stop by my last den today and grab my stuff.”

Could I take that to mean that she planned to stay at the cabin from now on? She’d probably object if I were to ask directly.

“All right. Be careful.” I responded as calmly as I could; I didn’t want her to sniff out my emotions.

Samya returned around dusk with a handful of belongings.

“Is that all you have?” I asked.

“Yeah. I move around a ton, so I pack light.”

“Ohhh, okay.”

Her habits were similar to those of migratory hunting and gathering tribes. Come to think of it, when we’d been swapping stories about our lives earlier, a lot of hers were hunting-related. Still, the fact that she’d agreed to live here (I think) meant that she wasn’t opposed to settling in one place. I decided to ask her about it should she tell me she’s moving in for good.

The next day, I refilled our water supply, and then we prepared to depart. It would only be a day trip, so we didn’t need much. Samya had the knife I’d made for her strapped to her hip and she wore her own clothing. As my guard, she wouldn’t be carrying any of the goods.

My attire was the same as usual—I looked like a villager. I brought along the farming tools and the knives I’d made, hoping to be able to sell them in town. Since the axes and hoes were bulky and unwieldy, I only took one of each, but I carried several sickles with me. The tools were strapped to me and they stuck out of my silhouette in every which way. Did I look suspicious? Sure, but people would assume that I was a merchant...I hoped. Right before we left, I went into the bedroom and stole some silver coins from the stash in the nightstand. Well, it was probably my money anyway.

“Are you ready?” I asked Samya.

“Mmhmm,” she replied.

So we set off!

It was my first outing in this world, and I was filled with both excitement and anxiety. This part of the forest was dense with trees, so the early morning sun barely filtered through the foliage. As we moved deeper into the forest, the atmosphere grew darker and darker. Good thing it wasn’t raining, or else it would’ve been impossible to navigate through this place.

According to the installed data, our trek through the heart of the forest would

take two hours, and then we'd walk another hour on the road before reaching our destination. The round trip would take six hours in total.

This route wasn't exactly what you'd call safe, and we were carrying valuable goods. Given those conditions, there was no such thing as being too careful. Luckily, with Samya as company, I wouldn't be traveling alone. From our conversations while eating together, I'd gathered that beastfolk were stronger than the average human. The combined presence of Samya and I should deter any crooks or scoundrels—it was unlikely that anyone would try to mess with us. However, as Samya had said before, it would take her about one more week to heal completely. In the meantime, it would be better if she could avoid strenuous activity, while gradually building her strength back up.

Samya suddenly skidded to a stop, interrupting my thoughts.

"Did you see something?" I asked.

"I can sense a large presence, but I don't think it's the black bear. There's a faint scent in the air too." She tiptoed ahead. True to her tiger side, her footsteps were silent as she made her way through the teeming undergrowth. She stopped behind a tree and peeked around it.

"Aaah, it's just a tree deer. They don't have much of a scent," Samya said. "Let's go around it. They're fierce when agitated. Since we're not hunting today, it's not worth the bother."

There weren't any deer-like animals around the cabin, but since we were now farther out, it was only natural that we'd come across some different creatures.

"Agreed," I said. "Our goal is the city anyway."

We skirted around the area. As we walked away, I turned around for a peek at the creature and saw an enormous deer calmly grazing in the grass. It was immediately obvious where the name "tree deer" had come from—its antlers looked exactly like the branches growing all around us.

"How do they prevent their antlers from getting stuck in the trees when they're so tall?"

"The largest antlers do get caught and snap off occasionally," Samya answered.

“Oh, is that how it works?” I guess tree deer were clumsier than they looked.

“When I start hunting again, I’ll catch one and show you,” she said. “The biggest horns will have marks from where they’ve already broken off once or twice. Unlike the horned deer, the tree deer’s antlers are just for camouflage, so it doesn’t matter if they break off or not.”

“Nature is amazing,” I said, awed.

I knew very little about biology in my old world, and my installation for this new world hadn’t included any scientific knowledge. It had already been fascinating to see the tree deer with my own eyes, and Samya’s narration had made it even better. I felt like I was watching a nature documentary.

“Tree deer usually attack by kicking at or head-butting their enemies. It’s a fierce opponent in close quarters,” she cautioned.

“Eh, I’ll worry about that when I get close to one.” I gave an exaggerated shrug.

She glanced over at me with a wry smile.

Samya and I made good progress after our encounter with the tree deer. After a while, we decided to take a quick lunch break. As we chatted, we each confirmed that we could still navigate back to the cabin in case of an emergency, even though it was now far behind us. In Samya’s case, beastfolk were able to identify their location using subtle markers in their surroundings, such as different scents. They *were* forest dwellers after all.

On the other hand, I relied on the knowledge and muscle memory that’d come with the installation package. Of course, I wouldn’t be telling Samya or anyone else that little secret. I was a guest in this world, after all. The Watchdog had said that my presence wouldn’t affect anything, but I didn’t want to take any chances by leaking unnecessary information.

We continued onward. The plan was to press forward to the road without rest. As we hiked, we encountered several other animals, but they were all harmless. We didn’t stumble across any carnivores. Samya explained that they were staying away because they could tell I was strong, but my theory was that

it had to do with Samya and her scent. Of course, I wasn't such an ignoramus that I would turn to a woman and say, "Your smell is keeping the beasts away." If I wanted to live to see retirement, I'd keep my mouth shut.

The trees started to grow sparse, and before long, we came to the main road. We'd be in the city in no time.

Even though this was a major thoroughfare, I still didn't see any people or even crop fields around us. I asked Samya about it, and she said, "The forest is a vast, unknown, and dangerous territory for the average person."

"Are there any bandits around?" I asked.

"Not many. Soldiers patrol this road, since it leads into the city."

"How do you know?"

"Hey, I have the right to go buy things in town too!" she snapped.

"Of course, of course." I backpedaled quickly.

Samya had said that she rarely left the forest, and I'd mistook "rarely" for "never." Come to think of it, even beastfolk who lived primarily within the woods would still need various things like salt, as well as fabric, needles, and the like to make the clothes they wore. According to Samya, beastfolk traded the animals they hunted for supplies.

"It's a risky gamble for bandits to attack anyone on this road," Samya continued, returning to our previous conversation. "The soldiers aren't idiots. They patrol the area randomly rather than on a fixed schedule."

These soldiers seemed passionate about their duties. I respected that.

"On top of that," she went on to say, "there're beasts and forest creatures to worry about, at least if you're a normal human." If a bandit troop were looting a caravan and a wolf came charging out of the forest, the tide would turn in a heartbeat. The bandits would quickly transform from hunters into prey. Wild animal attacks were rare, but the odds were still high enough to dissuade any gamblers.

As we talked, the remaining distance disappeared beneath our feet. Before I knew it, I could see the city's outer walls in the distance. Both Samya and I felt

reinvigorated by the sight and continued forward with fresh energy. There wasn't much distance left to cover—just one last push.

Actually, the walls were only called “outer” for historical reasons. When the city had first been built, the walls had made up the border and the defenses for the settlement, but over time, another fence had been built around everything. Our target, the city's Open Market, was just beyond that fence.

The market wasn't anything fancy. It had been started by a bunch of traveling merchants who'd decided to settle and make their living in the city—they all used to travel regularly to peddle their wares, but some decided to stay in town and open shops along the road, thus giving birth to a new market district. This district wasn't officially acknowledged by the city since the merchants had moved there of their own accord, but the shopkeepers still paid taxes since they were living and doing business on the land.

In our case, as long as we came as travelers and we didn't go past the actual city walls, we'd be able to keep the cost of our visit low and avoid paying any tolls.

One downside to not paying taxes was that we were technically outside the protection of the city lord. Citizens suffered the most from unsafe neighborhoods, and people who felt unsafe and dissatisfied with the government tended to pay fewer taxes. Because of this, the city guards were vigilant about cracking down on all crimes they saw. It was, of course, in the best interest of the lord to maintain law and order, regardless of whether the unfortunate victim of a crook was a taxpayer or not. That said, if we had a dispute with a townsman, undoubtedly, the soldiers would dispose of us first.

As we approached the fence, I saw that several guards were standing at attention along the road. They were only there to stop troublemakers, so as long as travelers came with good intentions, the city would welcome them with open arms.

We were just about to enter the market district when a young soldier called out to us. “Do you have a minute?”

He was wearing steel armor, but the metal had dulled and was full of dents and scratches accumulated from years of long use. Despite his age and frumpy

appearance, he did seem capable. The way he carried his spear suggested that he would skewer me without mercy if I tried to jump him.

I put on a cheerful face and brightly responded, "Of course! What can I do for you?" In my periphery, I could see Samya choking back laughter. I'll get her back for that later.

"I haven't seen you two around before," he said. "What's the purpose of your visit?"

"To sell my goods at the Open Market," I explained. "I've got a few sickles and knives with me, as well as an ax and a hoe."

"Is that all?"

"All for today. Do you need to check?"

"Yeah, thanks," he said. "You catch on fast."

Back on Earth, I'd gotten stopped by security more than once or twice because of my looks alone. And in my experience, it was in my best interest to cooperate with the authorities.

After all, I didn't want to risk being suspected of carrying illegal goods.

"All right. You're good to go," the guard said after rooting through our bags.

He seemed satisfied, though he'd been thrown off momentarily when he'd found Samya's knife. He let that go without mentioning it, so he probably thought it was just the same as the knives I'd brought to sell. He also hadn't said anything about Samya herself, so apparently it was true that beastfolk and humans were treated the same in the city. I'd assumed that discrimination would be prevalent in a feudal world like this one...but you know what they say about assumptions.

"Make sure you don't cause any trouble," said the guard before he let us go.

"We won't."

Finally, we stepped onto the sunlit streets of the city, and I was excited all over again.

I was hoping to set up shop in an area called the Open Market. As its name

implied, it was open to all vendors for a small fee and was the only place that people like me could do business. I'd made sure that I knew all the rules here. In order to live a slow life, it would be vital for me to sell in this market.

The Open Market was close to the entrance. When we arrived, we paid the fee, and in exchange, received a wooden tag that signified permission to sell. We also got a table to use as a countertop so we could display our wares.

Next, we had to find somewhere to set up shop. The merchants who'd arrived early, or who already had workshops in the city, had already sniped the best places, so we settled for second-best. We set up the table and arranged the knives and sickles on the surface. I placed the hoe and ax upright on the ground and leaned them against the side of the counter.

Now, our preparations were complete.

I turned to Samya, who was filling the essential role of my bodyguard. "Thanks for coming and helping out today."

"No problem," she said, shrugging. "I'm just standing around." I knew though, anything could happen.

Two hours passed—there were no issues, but no moments of triumph either.

I had yet to sell a single thing. I'd tried calling out to passersby, but no one had been interested. To showcase the sharpness of my knives, I'd even borrowed a couple of straw bundles from nearby vendors; straw was usually used to cushion goods, but I'd sliced through it with my knives instead. My demonstration, however, had been to no avail. The number of customers stayed at zero.

My current theory was that knives usually lasted a long time, so there weren't many people that needed to buy a replacement. Folks that needed new knives also wouldn't go out of their way to buy from somewhere they were unfamiliar with, even if the quality was better. What else could I make though? I had no choice but to persevere. Someone would buy my knives eventually, but in the meantime, the money I had on hand would slowly dwindle.

I stood back from the foot traffic, waiting for a customer to come, but I was

getting impatient. I could tell that my grim expression was unnerving Samya too. But then, a familiar face appeared in front of us—it was the guard that had searched us at the entrance.



“Hey,” he said in greeting. “Sell anything yet?”

“No, not a single thing,” I admitted.

He looked surprised. “What? Really?”

“Yes. I’m doing so poorly that I don’t know whether to cry or laugh.”

“All the better for me,” he said. “Can I get one of those knives?”

“H-Huh?”

“You see, when I inspected your wares earlier, I thought to myself, those are some fine knives! I can’t get my current knife to keep its edge no matter how much I sharpen it, so it’s time for a change,” he explained. “I was positive that you’d be sold out by now! I’d even prepared myself for disappointment.”

“Well, thank you for your kind words,” I said, handing him one of the knives. “Go ahead. Try it out if you wish.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” He drew the knife from its sheath eagerly. “As I thought, it’s well made. How much?”

I gave him the price I’d decided on beforehand with Samya. “Five silver coins.” It was around the amount that people here were willing to pay for a knife from an unknown blacksmith...aka, me.

“It’s that cheap?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes,” I confirmed. I’d hardly spent any effort on these knives, unlike the ones Samya and I were carrying.

“I’ll buy it then.” He counted out the money and handed it to me.

Taking his coins, I said, “Thank you for your patronage!”

I was flushed with pride. This was the first time I’d earned any money selling something that I had made with my own two hands.

“I’ll recommend you to the other guards if the blade cuts well.”

“Are you serious?” I said, breaking into a wide grin at his generous offer. “I would really appreciate that! I can vouch for the sharpness of these knives!”

He waved goodbye as he walked away, and as I watched him leave, I made

sure that I wouldn't forget what he looked like. He was my precious first customer!

In the end, the profit from selling that knife made up the entirety of my proceeds for the day. Though, if the guard truly followed through on his offer, I might be able to sell a few more next time. As we headed home, Samya and I idly chatted about the future.

###

The next day, first thing in the morning, I started making more knives. I wasn't putting any effort into them at all, only mass-producing them at speed. As I moved on autopilot, I analyzed the events from yesterday.

For starters, there had been no demand for farming tools at the Open Market. In retrospect, it should've been obvious: the majority of shoppers in the new market district were townsmen, merchants, and shop clerks—people who had no use for hoes or sickles. There were farms outside the city, but the farmers were tenants more often than not. This meant that the small plots of land they cultivated and the tools they used were rented from the city lord, and the tools were manufactured and repaired by city blacksmiths who were loyal to the lord.

There were a small number of independent farmers within the city's walls, but they shopped in the old markets and bought tools from the same smiths that made the tenant farmers' tools. In conclusion, the number of farmers who would make the trip to the Open Market to buy *my* tools was zero.

Come to think of it, while there had been other shops that sold self-defense knives, shortswords, and even quarterstaves, none besides mine had sold farming equipment. My biggest takeaway from yesterday was that I shouldn't have displayed those items with the rest of the goods.

What was I supposed to do with the sickles and hoe then? I guess I could use them myself, to cut the grass around the cabin and to plow a vegetable plot. The Watchdog did say that I'd have some production-related abilities, so surely I'd be able to make it work. The axes, however, were a different story. They could double as weapons, so someone might still buy them. Or, of course, I could use them myself. There was no shortage of trees to cut around here.

The cabin was reasonably close to the city. According to the installed data, the

bulk of the forest was in the opposite direction.

Knives were the clear choice as my flagship product. I could make other weapons for the guards too, but the ones working in the city were part of the lord's retinue; because of this, there was a low chance that they'd buy longswords and spears from me since the lord provided any weapons they used on the job.

The guard from yesterday had likely bought the knife for personal use, not to use as a weapon. However, merchants and their private guards would also buy weapons. There was money to be made if I caught them at the right time, so I decided to smith a few swords and spears in between knives.

But for today, I'd focus on the knives. They had been the most in-demand product in the booths around me yesterday. If I wanted to live a slow life, I first had to secure a stable income.

Over dinner, Samya asked, "Eizo, you're not gonna make any arrowheads?"

"Ah, no, I wasn't planning to. Why?"

"I'll be able to hunt again soon, and I want to equip myself with arrows...hopefully, tipped with the arrowheads you make."

"Well if that's the case, how could I refuse?" I said.

"Sweet! I'm counting on you!" she replied enthusiastically. Seeing her so happy was a reward in and of itself and made the work worth doing.

"Sure. By the way, I was thinking of going to the city again tomorrow. Can you come guard me again?"

"Of course, leave it to me!"

###

We took the same path back to town the following day and arrived without any problems. The route was safer than I'd originally anticipated, but it was still annoying that the trip took up an entire day. I thought that I should get myself a horse or something similar to cut down on travel time.

There was a popular video game franchise back on Earth where the player

could ride a giant bird. If an animal like that existed here, then I would love to see it with my own eyes...and if I could buy it for myself, even better. I wasn't in my previous world anymore, so I figured that I should seize any unique opportunities that came my way!

We entered the Open Market through the same gate as we'd taken two days before. Today, a different guard inspected our goods.

I'd brought only knives with me, and since I had less inventory to display, I also set up some straw bundles that I'd already sliced through as proof of the knives' sharpness. I hadn't even broken a sweat (figuratively) making the knives, but they were still higher quality than the ones being sold in the other booths. I also prepared some straw so that any prospective buyers could try the knives for themselves. I was determined to turn a profit today.

By early afternoon, I'd sold two knives to a man who looked like a peddler. The pre-cut bundles were a good idea—I had already surpassed my sales from the first day. In my mind, I was striking a victory pose.

"Eizo, you're practically glowing," Samya pointed out with a smirk. I was basically over the moon with joy, so I didn't mind a little taunting.

"Of course I am!" I exclaimed. "This is double what I sold last time, and I might be able to sell a few more before the end of the day."

She looked taken aback by my honesty but quickly recovered. "Yup, I hope so," she said with a genuine smile.

But that wasn't meant to be. No more customers came.

While I manned the counter, I had Samya run out and buy cured meat, wheat, and beans with the earnings from the day. By the time she came back, I was bored out of my mind.

"Today's going to end without any more sales," I grumbled to Samya when she returned.

"You sold more than two days ago," she pointed out. "Isn't that a win?"

"I guess you can call it that." My mouth twisted in dissatisfaction and I was

unable to accept reality. Samya only rolled her eyes at me, shaking her head.

A short time passed. I had just decided to close up shop early when the situation was turned on its head. A group of five men appeared in the market, dressed in full armor, which clanked as they walked. They weren't carrying any weapons, but each wore a surcoat emblazoned with the city's coat of arms, which identified them as guards. I couldn't remember doing anything to attract the guards' attention, but there was no mistake—they were heading straight for us.

Samya was standing directly behind me, but I knew that she'd drawn her knife. If I was threatened, she'd be ready to fight, regardless of her injuries. I only hoped we could leave this confrontation without anyone getting hurt.

The squad arrived at our counter, and the leader said, "Is it here? Are you the one who sold Marius the knife?"

That name wasn't familiar, but I thought I knew the person in question. "Are you talking about the young guard? I don't know his name, but he was good-natured and friendly."

"Yes! That's him!" he said. "I knew this was the place. Do you have any knives left in stock?"

"Yes, I do. I made more just yesterday, but I haven't sold too many today." It was depressing but true. Samya might've felt the same because I heard her sigh behind me.

"Great! We'll take them all," said the guard leader in a booming voice. He was grinning from ear to ear.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Excuse me? All of them?"

"Yes, every last one," he said, still smiling. "Marius has been flaunting his new knife for the past two days, and he wasn't exaggerating about its sharpness. We all wanted one for ourselves, so here we are."

"Well, they are for sale of course..." I said hesitantly.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, no, not exactly." Even if the knives were for personal use, I was worried

about encroaching on the territory of the city blacksmiths that the lord employed. In the end though, I decided to sell at least what I had with me. There were nearly ten blacksmiths who'd set up shop in the market today, so surely I wouldn't upset anyone by selling a few knives to the guards.

"Let's see. I have eight left today, so in total, that'll be forty silver coins," I said.

"Here you go, all forty. Check for yourself."

"Okay. One, two, three...thirty-nine, forty. Thank you, and here are the knives."

"Can we try them out?" the guard asked.

"Please do."

He unsheathed the knife with a grace that outclassed Marius's. This man must've been high-ranking.

"Everyone, go ahead," I said to the other guards in the squad.

They each grabbed a knife and started examining them. It was only then that I realized how suspicious it looked for such a large group of soldiers to all be waving knives around.

After a while, the leader spoke again. "These are top-notch."

"I appreciate it," I said politely, accepting the compliment.

The guards left with satisfied smiles on their faces.

When they were gone, I turned to my neighbors, who'd been observing the hubbub impassively. "I'm really sorry about the commotion," I said. A drove of armor-clad soldiers swanning in was distracting enough, but they'd also tested the knives en masse.

"It's no big deal. I was a bit startled, but a sale is always a cause for celebration," said the shopkeeper next to me, a man with a solid build who sold textiles.

I was relieved to hear his kind words. Finally, I could close up shop for the day.

###

I'd sold all ten knives!

More specifically, I'd sold them even though they were low-quality relative to what I could make when I really tried. In the eyes of the customers—weapons professionals no less—the knives had still been considered high quality. I knew that my talents were cheats and not innate, but I'd been pleased that my work had been well-received.

My prospects as a blacksmith were looking up. If today hadn't panned out, I would've been seriously on edge about my new life here. I'd already considered joining Samya in the forest and living off the food we hunted. That would be one type of slow life, but it wasn't the one I'd imagined for myself.

In any case, I couldn't get complacent, no matter how thrilled I was at the outcome of today. I wouldn't have any more inventory to sell unless I made them myself, so trips to the city would have to be put on hold for a while. I'd need to replenish my stock, but I also had several other to-dos on my mind.

First, I wanted to add a few new products to my repertoire. Nothing fancy, but longswords would come in handy for merchants and the mercenaries they hired as escorts. Longswords would also turn a higher profit. I couldn't forget the arrowheads either, or else Samya would have *my* head.

The cabin itself also needed some work. I could arrange to meet normal customers for an exchange of goods, but what if I wanted to host friends or important trade partners? We were fairly close to the edge of the Black Forest, but it was still a considerable distance from the city. Besides that, the cabin had only been built for one and contained no guest quarters, so visitors would have nowhere to stay. In the event that time got away from us while we were chatting, I could hardly turn my guests out into the forest in the dark. Samya and I were a two-person household, so we'd need at least two more rooms for the time being.

To build the rooms, I'd need lumber. There were plenty of trees to cut down, but the wood planks would need to be dried before they could be used. The drying process alone would take around two weeks, so the whole project would take quite a while to complete. If the city were closer, I could buy dried lumber there and carry it back. But as it was, I had no choice but to do it myself. I'd also

need at least an ax and a large saw to cut trees into planks. The axes I'd made before were mass-produced goods and not intended as personal use equipment, so I decided to custom-make these tools.

The list of things I needed to create had grown longer and longer. Oh well, I enjoyed smithing anyway.

I started with the ax and saw. For the ax, instead of starting from scratch, I modified one of the previous ones I'd made. I reheated the head in the forge, hammered it into the right shape, and quenched it. Since I was going to use it to cut trees, I didn't sharpen the blade at the end.

The saw I made from a sheet of metal hammered thin. I used a chisel to cut out the teeth, refined the edge with a file, and voila! The process seemed simple on paper, but it took me the entire day since I'd never made one before.

In my spare time, I forged the arrowheads I'd promised Samya. She'd helped me so much, so this was the least I could do.

First, I chiseled a model of the arrowhead from a wooden block and covered it with clay to make the mold. I then buried the base of the mold in sand with the opening facing up, and poured in the molten iron I'd heated in the forge. After the metal hardened, I popped the arrowhead from the mold. I reheated the extra iron that'd solidified in the mouth of the mold, and used a punch to carve a hole where the shaft of an arrow could be slotted in.

Finally, I sharpened and polished the arrowhead. All I had left to do was attach one of the shafts that Samya had brought with her, but that could wait until the day before she actually wanted to go hunting.

I'd been busy making the tools, so I'd had Samya refill our water supply (but only half a jug) for the last couple of days. She also helped out with chores other than cooking. It was good for her to get some exercise. I'd been on meal duty the entire time because according to Samya, "Your cooking is miles better than anything I can make, Eizo!" After hearing that compliment, how could I possibly refuse to cook?

In any case, now it was time to chop some wood! I'd asked Samya to help out

with the sawing. The cabin was in the middle of a clearing, but the surrounding woods were dense. Surely, no one would mind if I made our yard just a smiiidge bigger...

I hefted the ax over my shoulder and walked over to the first tree. I got into position, looking as if I were up to bat, and swung for the fences.

Thwunk! The loud, satisfying sound rattled the sky and reverberated around us, but the tree wasn't damaged at all...or so I thought. In the next second, the tree slid right off of the stump and crashed down to the other side. The ground quaked from the impact.

The cross section of the trunk looked as if it had been perfectly cut with a sawmill from my old world. I was proud that I had made such a fine ax; it was truly a force to be reckoned with. Although, I needed to be careful that I didn't accidentally cut at the wrong angle. If a tree fell on my head, that'd be the end of my second life. I chopped one more tree after double-and triple-checking that I'd gotten the right angle. It went down with no threats to my life and collapsed away from me with a thud that shook my whole body.

I cut the branches from both trees with the ax. Normally, a billhook would've been better suited for cleaning up the smaller branches, but such was the prowess of my ax that it took care of everything with ease. Next, I cut the trunk into usable lengths. The pleasing thwack of the ax rang out in the air. This trunk still looked intact after my swing, but I knew I'd cut it properly. When I pushed on the wood, the piece rolled away from the rest of the trunk, exactly the length I wanted it to be. I then cut up the rest into similar logs.

Now, the pieces were ready to be cut into planks.

"Samya!" I called toward the cabin. Before long, she came out carrying the saw, just like I'd asked her to beforehand.

"Finally! My time to shine," she said.

"Don't overdo it, all right? It shouldn't take too much strength anyway."

"I know. You put all your effort into this saw, right Eizo?"

"Of course. It's for me to keep."

“Then there’s no need to worry,” she assured me. “We’ll have the planks cut in no time.”

“Okay.”

We positioned ourselves, saw held between us, on opposite sides of one log. We then cut out the planks by sawing back and forth in rhythm. This process would have usually been both exhausting and long, but with the saw I’d made, it was like we were cutting tofu.

“Ha ha ha, amazing!” Samya said. “What a bizarre feeling.” The wood felt like velvet beneath the saw.

“Hey, the saw’s wobbling. Stop laughing so hard!”

“I know! I’m trying to be careful!”

All in all, it took only ten minutes from the first slice of the saw before we had our initial pile of planks. It was almost scary how fast we worked, despite the fact that we didn’t have a sawmill.

“At this rate, we’ll be able to cut up the rest of the trunk before the day’s over,” I said.

“Yeah. It would normally take so much longer. Eizo, your tools are really top-tier,” Samya replied.

We ate lunch and took a few breaks here and there. It took almost the entire day, but we finished cutting the planks and piled them up to dry. All in a good day’s work.

###

“I got my hands on the fabled longsword!”

“I must have it, even if I have to kill you for it.”

“F-Fiend! Wh-What are you doing?!”

I played out some iconic scenes from my childhood while forging the longsword. Once, Samya caught me in the middle of my reenactment.

“Eizo, what in the world are you doing?” she asked in exasperation. I wasn’t

going to tell her that I was role-playing snippets from *Romancing SaGa*, that was for sure.

Other than Samya judging me for my hobbies, the smithing proceeded without a hitch. The process for making a sword was much the same as the one for making arrowheads: I carved a wooden model of the sword and covered it with clay. Once the clay dried around the model, I broke it in half and removed the wood, leaving a cavity in the shape of the sword. Now I had the two sides of my mold. The wooden model could be reused, at least until it started to lose its shape, after which I'd have to make a new one.

I buried the base of the mold in sand with the opening facing up. Next, I heated iron in the forge and poured the molten metal into the mold. Once it was cool, I used the hammer to smooth out any variations in the blade's surface. Finally, I quenched the sword and sharpened the blade. Now the sword body was complete. I'd only have to wrap the hilt with leather and make a sheath.

I made several of these entry-level swords, but I also created one elite model. I carved the figure of a sitting cat into the pommel of the elite longsword. I based the insignia on a picture of a cute and chubby cat that I'd seen back on Earth. The decoration and sheath would normally be done by a specialist, but my cheat abilities allowed me to do everything myself. Of course, knowing and doing were two different things. There were minor flaws in the sword since it was my first one and my muscle memory hadn't completely synced up with the data. Either way, I was still pleased with the outcome.

I'd also replenished my stock of knives, and I squeezed in some arrowheads during my free time. All in all, the swords and knives took me five days to manufacture. That was the limit of how fast I could work by myself.

Around the time I finished the longsword, Samya approached me for a conversation. There was something important we still had yet to chat about, and I thought it was about time.

"Eizo," Samya began.

"What is it?"

"I'm mostly healed, so it's about time I go back to hunting."

“Oh yes. I’ll finish up the arrows then. Can you go get your shafts?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I headed to the workshop first and readied the arrowheads and hammer. Samya arrived with several thin wooden dowels. If I mounted the head crooked, the arrow wouldn’t fly the way it was intended, so I concentrated and put my all into it.

To haft the arrow, I inserted a dowel into the socket of an arrowhead and fixed it into place. I used a metal pin because she was going to use it for hunting. However, I’d heard that arrows used in battle were fixed with wax, so the shaft could be easily detached from the head. When an enemy tried to remove an arrow from their body, the shaft would pop out of the socket and leave the arrowhead still embedded in their flesh. The tactics that people came up with when it came to war were truly frightening.

I finished and inspected my work. As expected of a cheat ability, the arrow was almost perfect. It may have been off by a degree or two, but this was definitely better than the work of most smiths. Well, perhaps “definitely” was too strong a word.

When I’d finished hafting ten arrows, Samya called out to me again. “Hey, Eizo.”

“Hmm?” I responded while continuing my work.

“Do you remember saying that I could live here if I wanted?” she asked.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“Is that offer still on the table?”

“Of course. I never revoked it as far as I can recall.”

“I’m really happy that you saved me and brought me here,” she said. “Even though I’ve mostly spent my time resting, it’s been fun to help out around the house. I enjoy taking walks with you and eating with you and hearing all of your interesting stories. And above all of that, I like watching you work the most, so...”

Samya paused. I was sure that it took a lot of courage for her to ask me to live

here. I didn't know how old she was since beastfolk and humans aged differently. Judging from her voice and behavior, she must've been considerably younger than me. Even if she was one hundred percent sure that I had no ulterior motives, she was still a young girl asking to live with a geezer like me. I worked on the arrows and waited patiently for her to gather her fortitude.

"So..." she finally said, "can I stay with you?"

"I've already said you could, so of course; you're welcome here for as long as you like." I'd been nonchalant, but needless to say, it *was* a big deal.

"Sweet! Thanks, Eizo!" Samya said, slapping me on the back.

"Hey! That hurts, you know."

"I can't help it. I'm happy!" She gave the brightest smile I'd ever seen on her face.

"By the way, Samya."

"What's up?"

"How old are you?"

"Let's see...oh I get it," she said. "It's hard for you to tell as a human, right?"

"I know that you're young, but that's about the extent of it."

"I'm five."

"What did you say?! Five? Five?!" I said, raising my voice in disbelief. I never would've guessed since she was so put-together. Were all beastfolk this mature as children? When I was five, I was a brat...

"You're overreacting. Beastfolk age differently from humans. That's all."

I supposed it was like how cats and dogs back on Earth aged much faster than people did.

"What about in human years then?"

"Hmm, around twenty-five? My appearance won't change much from here on out. I've been told I'll live to be about fifty. Humans live to around eighty, right?"

“Yeah.” Our life expectancies were similar. She would live at least twice as long as any cat or dog.

“What about you, Eizo?”

“What?”

“How old are you?”

“Me? I’m thirty.” On the inside, I was forty, but because I’d seen my reflection in the lake, I knew that I appeared properly thirty.

“Only thirty huh?”

“Yes, what of it?”

“No, I just...well, I haven’t met many people in my five years, but based on the ones I have met, I thought you were much older.”

She was sharp. Was that a beastfolk trait too?

“Thirty is plenty old, even for a human. I already have one foot in the land of geezerhood,” I said to appease her suspicions. She didn’t ask any further questions, so I supposed it worked.

“Look, I finished just as we were talking.”

“Wha—! Oh my god! Look at these beauties!” she exclaimed over the completed arrows. “You’re the best, Eizo!” It was strange to see a young girl get so excited over arrows, but her praise filled me with joy.

“Thanks,” I said simply, and left it at that.

Slowly but surely, my new normal was taking shape. I didn’t know how it’d evolve from now on, but the events from today were surely going to be a part of it.

“My Lady Samya, can I ask you something?” I said to her the next day.

“Gross, why’d you call me that? I’m getting goosebumps.” She wasn’t holding anything back.

“You’re so mean!” I responded. “But anyway, I finished the knives and the new longswords, so I wanted to go into town again. It’s been a week. Any

longer and the people we met are going to forget about us.”

“Makes sense to me. All right, I’ll go with you.”

“Sorry to push back your hunting plans.”

“No problem. There’s no rush.”

And so, we agreed to prepare for another trip into the city. Samya brought her knife and bow, along with the arrows I’d made. A long-range weapon would be useful in an emergency, and I knew that my arrows would pierce right through any half-assed armor.

As for me, I packed all the knives for sale into a knapsack and slung another bag around my waist with food for the road. The longswords were trickier, but I ended up tying all but one to the top of the knapsack. I strapped the last one to the other side of my waist. My self-defense knife went into my breast pocket. I looked exactly like a merchant from the fantasy art I used to see back in my previous world! Though I tried to contain my excitement, Samya saw through me.

“What’re you so happy about?” she asked.

“Nothing. Just thinking that I hope the longswords sell.”

“Uhuuuh,” she said, clearly suspicious, but she didn’t pursue it any further. She was either already used to me getting excited over random things, or she thought all merchants were eccentric. Maybe both.

We headed into the forest. The longsword was heavier than my usual baggage, but I was able to keep pace thanks to my improved physique. I could handle today’s inventory by myself, but hypothetically, if I wanted to bring twenty longswords and twenty short spears, it’d be physically impossible to carry it all. I’d have to get a cart someday; that would be better than trying to lug everything myself and having to take frequent breaks to rest. I might have to cut down some more trees for cart materials.

We made fast progress toward the city with only a short break in the middle. When we were still in the forest, about thirty minutes away from the road, Samya suddenly halted.

Something was up.

“Why did you stop?” I asked.

“It smells like blood,” she explained in a whisper. “I think there’s a carnivore out there. It might be a forest wolf, but it’s hard to tell because the blood is overpowering the predator’s scent. It’s already noticed us.”

“What do we do?” Unconsciously, I hefted the longsword so that I was ready to attack at any moment.

“Let’s wait and see,” she proposed. “The blood means it’s already caught something to feast on. It may be satisfied with that and leave.”

“All right.”

“If it comes for us...”

“If it comes for us?”

“...That longsword you’ve readied will get to see some action.”

Samya had lived in this forest longer than me, so I was going to follow her lead.

After a short while, she whispered, “It’s gone.”

“Good,” I said in relief. I clapped one hand to my chest. The longsword would’ve worked in a pinch, but it was intended for sale after all. I’d wanted to avoid using or damaging it, so I was glad that the wolf had left without engaging.

We continued walking toward the road. “What do forest wolves hunt?” I asked Samya.

“A bit of everything,” she replied. “Mostly tree deer, but they’ll also hunt grass-blade rabbits and earth mice. The other beastfolk and I also hunt tree deer, but other than the heart, we leave the internal organs behind. We don’t bury the offal, so sometimes wolves eat our leftovers too.”

She explained what the other animals were when I asked. Grass-blade rabbits were named after their slender, green ears, while earth mice were brown and lived in holes that they dug in the ground. Many animals in the Black Forest

survived using camouflage; it was a necessary trait to have in order to survive here, even though it was difficult for flying predators to see through the canopy. The prey animals avoided becoming food by hiding in plain sight. Because of this, the apex predators needed to have excellent vision.

Hmm. A predator with sharp eyes. Kind of like...a dragon? Did magical beasts exist in this world?

“Samya, are there any dragons here?”

“I’ve never seen one myself, but I’ve heard about them before.”

So they *did* exist. I wanted to see one for myself, but I wasn’t sure that I would live to tell the tale. That would be a treat I’d save for the end of my second life.

Thanks to the hard work the soldiers were putting in behind the scenes, we reached the city safely without anything unusual or exciting happening. Marius was one of the guards on duty at the entrance.

“We meet again!” I called out to him in greeting.

“Oh hey! You’re back. I hadn’t seen you around in a while, so I was getting worried, y’know.”

“I ran out of inventory, so it took some time to make more,” I explained. “I owe all my business to you, Marius.”

“Don’t mention it. Honestly, even I was a little shocked. Sorry if the other guards caused any problems for you,” he said.

“Not even a shadow of one.”

“Okay, good. Are those what you’re selling today?”

“Yes. I’ll start offering longswords from today onward. Along with the usual knives, of course.”

“I may swing by for a visit then.”

“Please do.”

After parting from Marius, Samya and I headed into the Open Market. We

paid the entrance fee, prepared the counter, and put the goods out for display. The textile merchant from last time had also set up nearby, so I waved hello.

With that, I was once again open for business.

Since it was quiet at the beginning, I sent Samya away to buy food for us with some of the earnings from our last sale. Our supply had dwindled a fair amount in the past week. While she was gone, I sold four knives. They had apparently gained a reputation amongst the guards, and I spotted a good number of soldiers carrying them around.

I also sold two longswords. The buyer was a traveling merchant, and he bought one for personal use alongside one to resell somewhere far away. He'd told me with a chuckle that even if he couldn't sell the sword, he wouldn't mind keeping both blades. Even so, I thought he was probably confident he *could* sell it since he probably wouldn't want to travel with it otherwise.

Travel, huh? What a beautiful word. I'm not sure when, but someday, I'd treat myself and Samya to a company retreat if we had free time.

When I was about to close the shop, Marius dropped by, dragging a fellow guard with him. They each bought a longsword.

"I'd be happy to sell them to you, but will you get into any trouble with the city lord?" I asked. "Doesn't he loan you all your weapons?"

"Only the ones we use on the job, but there's no hard and fast rule for the blades we use for personal training. And if we accidentally bring our training weapons into work, well, it happens, right?" Marius gave an exaggerated wink. In my eyes, he seemed twice as cool as he usually was.

By the end of the day, we had sold most of the knives and all the longswords except for one elite model. We'd had time to buy food as well. All in all, the day was a smashing success. Our slow life was on track for at least another week.

When we returned home, I took some of the wheat Samya had bought and ground it into flour. I then kneaded a portion of the flour with water and salt in a wooden bowl. While the dough rested, I put away the other food. Once it had

rested enough, I divided the dough into pieces and rolled out each portion. I finished cooking them off on the pan. The result was a stack of wheat flatbread, or “roti” as they were called in my previous world. For dinner, I paired the roti with a soup of dried meat and root vegetables.

While I’d been cooking, Samya had taken the bow out for a test run to prepare for her hunt tomorrow. She came back in time for us to eat together.

“How did the bow feel?” I asked Samya over dinner.

“Oh, um, pretty good. I used two of the arrows you made, and they were absolutely perfect.”

“Good, good, just what I like to hear. What are you going to hunt tomorrow?”

“Some tree deer or boar maybe,” she said. “If there’s time, I want to take down a bird or two.”

“That’d be a good addition to our menu.”

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to it!” she exclaimed, visibly excited at the prospect. After all, as one of the tiger beastfolk, she had the blood of a predator flowing through her veins.

We were both worn out from our trip into town. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day, so we called it a night and headed to bed early.

###

Samya prepared to go out and hunt the next morning. She put on her leather armor and slung her bow over her shoulder while I packed her a lunch of roti and dried meat. I would’ve used stewed meat, but she’d requested food that she could eat on the go.

“See you later,” I said, walking her out. “If you run into anything dangerous, turn around right away!”

“I got it, I got it. See ya,” she said, before heading out at a brisk pace.

It was time for me to get to work too. My work, of course, was forging items to refill my inventory. I decided to make four more knives today and save the longswords for tomorrow. Since I was only making entry-level model knives, I forged on autopilot.

Even if I didn't try very hard, my knives were of higher quality than anything the other smiths could make. My skills *were* cheats after all. It bothered me on principle, but I had to face reality—as an artisan, the reviews of customers could make or break my business. Therefore, I could only be grateful for the skills I'd been given to support my second life.

While my body played out the steps of the forging process, I tuned my mind to other problems. I still had some raw iron left, but sooner or later, I was going to run out. I'd need to secure a supplier, preferably one that I could partner with long-term. At the pace I was making new items, I'd need to restock my raw materials frequently.

That train of thought led me to another issue: I couldn't have the supplier visit me here at the cabin, could I?

I could live in this forest with no fear, largely thanks to Samya and her instinct for danger. She was also the reason why the trips to and from the city had gone so smoothly. What would I have done yesterday if I'd been alone, and I'd inadvertently stumbled into the wolf's feeding ground? Even if I'd been able to fight it off, I could've been injured in the middle of battle. Fighting would've eaten up time as well, and in the worst-case scenario, I could've been stuck in the forest at night. Would I have really been safe while wounded in the pitch-black forest?

I needed to get myself a cart. It would be helpful both for fetching raw materials and for hauling my own stock. So far, I had been able to carry all the items by myself, but I'd reach my limits sooner or later. I should find myself a cart before then.

Should I buy one or make it myself? If I were to make one, I'd need to cut down more trees for wooden planks. It would take two weeks for the wood to dry. In that time, I'd only need to make two, maybe three trips into town, and I could manage by myself in the meantime. So why not? I'd make one. If it turned out horribly, I could always buy one later.

I churned out knives while drifting in my thoughts. By the time I finished, it was already dusk, and Samya had returned from her hunt.

"I'm back!" she called.

“Welcome home,” I said, but Samya only looked away, squirming. “Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... I-I was just a little happy. Y’know, because...” She trailed off.

The realization struck me. “Ohhh, I get it. It’s nice having someone to come home to, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

I had never been able to acquire that particular type of happiness for myself, at least, up until now. Had it been the same for Samya? But what if she’d never been attacked by that bear? She was happy I’d rescued her, or so she’d said... But what if I’d just stopped her from living out a normal, happy life? She could’ve lived on in the forest, eating the animals she hunted, maybe meeting other beastfolk and starting a family.

Although come to think of it, the Watchdog had said that I wouldn’t be able to affect this world in any major way, so the event of Samya’s attack and rescue would’ve still occurred. To put it another way, as long as Samya didn’t die in that moment, then it didn’t matter who saved her, as far as the world’s equilibrium was concerned. Her rescuer hadn’t needed to be me... So the question remained: Was Samya happy to have been saved? Or, more specifically, to have been saved by *me*?

I wanted it to be the latter. One day, if she came to know the whole story, I hoped she would say to me, “Eizo, I’m glad it was you.”

Breaking free of my thoughts, I asked Samya, “What did you end up hunting?”

“A tree deer. I cleaned out the guts and left it to soak in the lake. I’m gonna bring it back first thing in the morning.”

“I’ll go with you to help,” I offered. “Come and eat after you wash your hands.”

“Mmkay.”

We ate together at the dining table as usual. Over dinner, I asked, “How were the arrows and knife?”

“Absolutely killer! The arrows pierced deep into the deer’s body, and the

knife made dressing it a breeze!”

“Great. I’m glad they were useful.”

She told me all about her hunt, gesturing wildly for emphasis. I watched her animated retelling with a smile on my face.

###

We went to the lake early the next morning, bringing along an ax and a rope from my workshop.

“Hmmm, where’d I leave it?” Samya muttered as she tried to find the carcass. “Ah! Over there! You see where that arrow’s sticking out?”

“I see it.”

“It’s just a little farther in from that marker,” she said, pointing.

“All right. Let’s go and see.”

When we approached the area she’d shown me, I saw the deer’s body submerged in the water.

“First, we gotta get it to shore,” she said. “Eizo, gimme a hand.”

“Okay.”

We pulled it out by its legs. Since it was buoyed slightly by the water, it was easier to move than I’d expected. After we dragged it onto the shore, I chopped down two smaller trees and cut each into several pieces. I lashed them all together with the rope to form a carrying rack, then I attached more rope to one end of the rack so we could pull the carcass along. Finally, I loaded the deer onto the rack.

With the two of us moving it together, we made good time. Maybe we were strong, or the deer was just light. We arrived home after forty minutes.

Now, on to the butchering. We brought the deer to a tree that stood close to the cabin and hung it upside down on one of the branches.

First, we skinned it. Samya was obviously a practiced hand, as she finished the work in the blink of an eye. She *had* used my knife, and I liked to think that it made a difference as well.

Before cutting off its head, she pointed at the horns. "See these marks? It's from when this horn broke off."

"You're right. I see it!" I looked closer and saw the same kind of marks scattered up and down the antlers.

"A deer this size would definitely snag its horns when trying to flee from a predator like a forest wolf."

"Now that I'm seeing it with my own eyes, I understand what you were trying to say."

"Was I right or was I right?" she said with well-deserved pride. The depths of her knowledge never failed to astound me.

"You said you removed its innards last night. What did you do with them?" I asked.

I hadn't seen anything when we'd pulled the deer out of the lake. Had she done something to protect them against parasites? I'm sure those existed in this world as well.

"I left the offal in the spot where I killed the deer. Either the wolves will eat them or they'll decay and be recycled back into the ecosystem."

"Oh okay, I get it."

She'd left them to the whims of nature, so to speak. Had this been my old world, her actions would've caused a host of problems. However, it didn't seem like that was the case in this world; the people here either didn't know or didn't care about parasites. I doubted that there was a food safety administration overseeing hygiene.

The butchered hunks of tree deer looked like the meat I was used to seeing in my last world. I knew, of course, that venison was deer, but I'd never felt it so acutely as now after I'd just watched the butchering happen in real-time.

"What do we do with the bones?" I asked.

"I'll throw them away farther out from the cabin. The wolves will eat those too," she explained.

"If we make a habit of this, won't a wolf stalk us back here?"

“Well, it happens once in a while.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah. Even if they follow us, they’re less likely to attack anything that seems strong and gives off the scent of beastfolk or humans,” she said, continuing her explanation. “They know that they’ll get food from us even if they don’t hunt for themselves.”

“Smart.”

“They have to be, otherwise they wouldn’t survive in this forest.”

“True.”

Most wild animals knew that if they attacked a hunter recklessly, they might end up as prey themselves. Sure, there may have been a few dim-witted beasts who would try to attack, but not many.

We ate tree deer meat for both lunch and dinner. I hung the rest in the workshop so it could dry into jerky. This room was a hot and arid environment since I had the fire going almost every day. The meat drying process wasn’t particularly interesting. I decided that one of these days, I’d like a room for smoking meat or even a full-blown smokehouse. Meat prepared that way would expand our palettes considerably. Delectable cuisine was also an important part of living a slow life!

###

Samya didn’t go hunting the next day. It seemed customary for beastfolk to take breaks between hunts so that they didn’t kill more than they could consume and deplete natural resources unnecessarily. I had her help me with my work instead.

I was back to making longswords.

The first task I assigned to her was covering the wooden model I’d made last time with clay to make the mold.

“This is awesome,” she said.

“Isn’t it?” The sculpting felt more like play than work.

Once it was dry, I handled splitting the mold in half and burying it in sand. The sword shape had been cleanly imprinted in the mold. Samya was excited all over again when she saw the results of her handiwork.

Next, I demonstrated the hammering technique for flattening and evening out the blade. I had her give it a try.

“Whoa, cool!” she exclaimed.

“Right?” I said. “Okay then, I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Sure!”

In the meantime, I finished up the blade. Before the day was done, we’d made two swords. We worked together the day after that too, so in total, we had restocked four longswords.

###

“I’m off to hunt today,” Samya told me the next morning.

“All right, be careful,” I cautioned. “Take it easy! We’re going back to the city tomorrow.”

“Got it. See you later,” she said, waving goodbye as she turned away. She danced through all the undergrowth and disappeared into the depths of the forest.

Let’s see. What should I make next?

I wanted to create something different; it was important to expand my breadth of goods. I already had knives and longswords, so what about a spear?

I still had some of the bigger branches reserved from when I’d chopped down the trees. I chose a branch 140 centimeters long—about shoulder height—and shaved it into a cylinder for the staff. Next, I had to make the spearhead and a cap for the butt end.

The spearhead I shaped from a piece of iron. To start, I hammered it into a rectangular block. I elongated the bottom and shaped it into a cylinder, making sure to include a space for the staff to slot into. I hammered the tip into a cylinder as well, but with a pyramid at the business end.

Some spears had blades or spikes protruding off of them, but I wanted to design this one primarily as a thrusting weapon. For the cap, I used a piece of iron that weighed the same as the head and shaped it into a cylinder. One end I hollowed out for the staff, and I made the other end slightly pointed. To put it all together, I quenched the spear tip and slotted the staff into place.

As it was my first ever spear, it was neither entry-level nor elite. I considered it to be a custom model. I wouldn't put it up for sale, but if I ever hired another guard, I could potentially give it to them.

I assumed a basic stance and tested it out. It wasn't as long as the pikes that armies carried into battle, and wouldn't be very useful in a phalanx formation (to use an example from my previous life). However, it would work just fine for the city guards. In fact, as I whirled the spear around, I felt like a guard myself and got a bit excited. However, if I wanted to sell it to the guards, I'd have to make it look more official. Right now, it had more of the rough-and-tumble feel, like a weapon a vigilante troop might use.

It only took a day to produce the spear. Had it not been for the magical tools and my cheat abilities, it would've taken longer. I mused over this while banking the fire in the workshop. Before I headed back to the living area, I checked how the meat was drying.

And with that, today's work was officially over.

I was thinking about what to do for dinner when Samya came back to the cabin.

"Welcome back," I said.

"I-I'm...home," Samya said shyly.

Please get used to it soon. If you react like that every time, it's embarrassing for me too!

"What did you catch today?" I asked.

She held up two birds and said, "Foliage birds."

They were each about the size of a crow back in Japan. Their wings looked like the leaves of the trees around the cabin, so camouflage was obviously their

primary defense mechanism, like many of the other animals in the forest. I hadn't seen them around when I'd been out by myself—it could be that they blended perfectly into their surroundings, or maybe I'd simply overlooked them. Foliage birds must've been hard to find and shoot down if even a skilled archer like Samya could only catch two in a day.

“I'll cook these up for dinner then,” I said.

“Can't wait!”

To prep the birds, I first had to pluck out their feathers. The flight feathers on their wings and tail were a beautiful jade green, so I set some aside for later to use as decoration. I thought that the feathers on their bodies could be used to stuff duvets or pillows, but when I asked Samya about my idea, she said, “People don't usually use foliage birds for that kind of thing,” so I gave up on it. The birds didn't have many feathers anyway. I'd heard previously that the best birds to use as stuffing for bedding had an abundance of small feathers. The foliage birds didn't fall into that category.

Once I'd defeathered them completely, I singed the remaining hair from their bodies over the magical stove. Then, I cut open their stomachs and removed the organs. The gizzards and livers were edible, but I threw them away this time since Samya said, “We don't eat them here.” Finally, I cut off the breast meat, along with the wings and thighs at the joints, seasoned them with salt, and grilled them.

Tonight's dinner was a lavish feast of tree deer soup, grilled foliage bird, and flatbread. I'd only seasoned the foliage bird with salt, but the flavor wasn't bad all in all. As a matter of fact, since the flavor of the meat itself was light and delicate, the simple seasoning suited the bird more than a rich sauce would have.

“We're heading into town tomorrow,” I said. “And we won't have to buy more cured meat this time thanks to your efforts.”

“Kay. I'll catch more for us next time too!”

“Yes, please,” I said, smiling. Samya nodded and grinned back.

Chapter 2: First There Were Two

The next day, Samya and I prepared for another trip into town. I thought about taking along the spear I'd made for self-defense, but decided against it since I hadn't tried it out yet.

I should do a cutting (thrusting) test tomorrow.

All was quiet on the road to town, including the trek through the forest. Marius was once again on duty at the entrance. The spear he was holding was provisioned by the lord, but strapped on his waist was the personal longsword that he'd brought to work "by mistake."

"Hey!" Marius called to us. "I didn't expect to see you guys back just yet."

"I was able to make more items, so here we are," I responded.

"Right, right." He nodded. "What's the lineup today?"

"The same as last time."

"That means you're selling more longswords, right? I'll make sure to tell the other guards."

"Yes, I have them stocked," I confirmed. "Much obliged."

He hesitated a moment. "Oh...one more thing."

"What is it?" I prompted.

"...No, never mind. You'll see when you reach the Open Market."

I paused in confusion, but finally I just said, "Well, I guess we're off then."

"See you."

What happened to the frank and open Marius I'd come to know? I'd never seen him so evasive before.

I tried not to let it distract me as we headed into the city. The plan for today was simple: sell the goods, buy salt, and go home. We decided to split up early today. I was carrying all of the products anyway, so I would set up first, while

Samya went to buy supplies.

The old man who staffed the entrance to the Open Market remembered my face this time and greeted me with warmth, unlike the previous times I'd come. As usual, I paid the fee in exchange for a counter and searched for a free space. The one I had last time was already taken, so I chose a spot nearby.

I didn't see the textile merchant today. We'd come to town a few days earlier than planned, so maybe this was his day off, or maybe he wouldn't be coming for a while. Either way, I felt a little lonely not seeing his face.

The preparations to get the shop up and running went quickly. I had the same products as last time, so I could move on autopilot. I was open for business as soon as I'd finished setting up. Luckily, the Open Market had no fixed hours.

A little before noon, the merchant who'd bought two longswords from me last time swung around to visit.

"Yo," he said in greeting. "How's business?"

He was speaking casually, so I responded in kind, without the polite shopkeeper facade I usually put on. "No good today."

"You haven't sold anything?"

"Not a thing."

"All right. Then give me all of your longswords," he said.

"Huh?! Seriously?"

"Yup. My buyer was over the moon with the last two and asked me for several more."

"Really? If I'd known, I'd have made ten more, even if it'd meant staying up all night!"

"Whoa, someone's getting greedy," he said with a grin.

"I've been slaving over the forge all week, so I'm sick of iron. It's time to see some silver," I joked.

He laughed. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

He ended up buying all four longswords and filled my quota for the day in one

fell swoop.

I'd brought along the elite model too, but no one had asked about it yet. At this rate, no one was going to buy it, and I'd have no choice but to accept that. Maybe I'd give it to the traveling merchant the next time I saw him, just to see if he could sell it elsewhere.

While I was wondering what to do, Samya returned with salt for curing tree deer meat and some lunch from a food stand. The dish she'd bought was sliced boar meat over crusty bread, drenched all over with a sweet and spicy sauce. It wasn't anything like pizza or a hamburger, but I was hooked on it. We ate it every time we came here. Within the city's walls, the rule was that shops had to specialize in one thing: bread shops sold bread, butchers sold meat, so on and so forth. This was a dish you could only find in the Open Market.

After we ate our fill, I sold several more knives to first-time customers.

That's when *she* came strolling along.

At first glance, I thought she was a kid. But when I looked closer, she was actually a solidly built woman, if somewhat on the short side. She was turning her head left and right as if she were on the lookout for something.

Samya had caught sight of her too. She turned to me and muttered in a low voice, "A dwarf. How rare."

"There aren't many of them?" I whispered back.

"Not around here, at least," she said. "I've only met one once. He was wandering in the forest, and I helped him find his way to the road."

"I see."

A rare sighting, huh? It made me happy that I was lucky enough to see a race that seldom showed their faces. And it was a dwarf no less, a race I'd heard of before. If there were dwarves here, elves wouldn't be a stretch either, right? Later, I would ask Samya if she'd ever met an elf.

The dwarf woman saw my stand from across the way and rushed over in a flurry. When she got closer, I saw that her nose was on the round side, but otherwise, she looked perfectly human. Her arms and legs were thick with

muscle. Back on Earth, she wouldn't have been quite bodybuilder status, but she would've definitely been called a gym rat.

When she arrived at our table, she said in a loud and earnest voice, "E-Excuse me!"

I was slightly bowled over by her exuberance. "Yes? Can I help you with anything?"

"Are you the one who made the knives for the city guards?!" she asked. Her words poured out of her with no time for breath.

"Yes..." I confirmed with some hesitation, "that's me."

Samya shifted her stance beside me. I didn't think there was going to be any trouble, but it tickled me to see her taking her role as my escort so seriously.

The woman didn't seem to notice anything and continued on to say, "Are these knives the same type you've been selling?"

"Yes, they are."

"May I?" she said, reaching toward a knife.

"Be my guest."

She removed one from its scabbard and inspected the blade and handle. After a while, she handed it back. "May I please see the highest-quality product you've made?"

"Well, yes," I said. "I suppose so."

The highest-quality product... I was confident that the build of the knife she'd just looked at surpassed anything that the blacksmiths around here could make. For her to inspect it and immediately ask to see something better meant that she was sure there *was* something better.

By sheer coincidence, I did have an item that met those requirements: the elite model longsword. I'd planned to sell it sooner or later, so there was no reason I couldn't show her. I unbuckled it from my waist and passed it over.

She took it from me with reverence and slid the sword gently out of its sheath. Never mind that I had put in a considerable amount of work to make it

—the blade looked superb, even to my eyes. The most skilled blacksmith in these parts wouldn't be able to make anything matching this longsword's caliber, so I could easily sell it for ten times the price of the entry-level models.

The woman took her time examining the sword, going over it meticulously. In fact, she took so long that a man had drifted over to see what the fuss was. I sold one knife to him (thank you for your patronage). The whole time, she inspected the longsword without looking up, not even once.

Just when I was about to ask her to return it, she said, "Thank you very much. I'm done with it now." She sheathed the sword and handed it back to me.

"Thank you," I said, but the woman was already moving again. Samya reacted in turn and pulled me behind her to shield me.

However, the woman had no violent intentions. She kneeled down, slapped both hands on the ground, and bowed her head in a perfect...dogeza pose?

Huh?! Dogeza is a custom in this world too?!

While I was busy being shaken by this revelation, the woman plowed on with no hesitation. Still on her hands and knees, in front of everyone in the Open Market, she yelled, "Please make me your apprentice!"

I was shocked into silence. I finally managed to say, "P-Please, get up," but she didn't move a muscle.

"I beg of you! Make me your apprentice!" she repeated, her voice booming around the market.

No way... She couldn't be planning to stay on the ground until I agreed, right?

A crowd had started to form around us with onlookers craning their heads to see what was going on. I wanted to get this woman and, more importantly, Samya, away from curious gazes, so I said, "Let me close up shop first, and then we can talk."

Thankfully, that seemed to placate the woman. She stood back up.

Without another second of delay, I cleaned up the booth. I wanted to get out of here before the guards started to come around too; they were my valuable customers, and I didn't want to make more work for them. I put everything

away in record time and picked up the counter so I could check out at the return booth.

Just as the three of us turned to leave, Marius poked his head through the crowd, looking like he was just out for a leisurely stroll. “Hey!” he called out. “I see you all had a chance to meet up. Good for you, Lady Dwarf!”

“Yes, I owe it all to you!” She was beaming.

So *this* was what Marius had hinted at earlier.

“Marius, couldn’t you have just told me this morning?” I asked reproachfully.

“It’s not like anything would’ve changed even if I’d told you, right?” he responded.

I couldn’t deny that...but I could’ve at least been mentally prepared, you know?

“Besides, it was a treat for me to see your look of surprise,” Marius continued. “You usually look so dour.”

Now that I thought about it, he’d made his appearance with suspiciously good timing. He must’ve been spying on us and waiting for the perfect moment. “You’re awful...” I grumbled.

“There, there, let me off the hook this once. There’s no fun around these parts otherwise.”

“You owe me one.”

“You got it, Boss!” he said, and he even gave me an exaggerated salute.

Marius was a good person, but I wished he wouldn’t get so carried away. At least I got him to promise me something in return.

After bidding farewell to Marius, we returned the table and made our way to an inn in the new market district. The inn itself was nothing special: the first floor was a tavern and the second was where guest rooms were. The dwarf woman had been staying here for the last three days.

We all got drinks and sat down. The woman cradled a large beer stein that

looked like a small wooden cask instead of the glass mugs I was used to.

Wait a second...didn't she order a grape brandy?

She introduced herself first. "My name is Rike Moritz."

"You have a family name?" Samya questioned in a low voice.

"Oh, no, it's the name of our workshop," Rike explained.

"Workshop name?" This time I asked the question, as Samya sipped her ale next to me.

"Yes. It's common for several dwarf families to join together to form one workshop. Everyone that lives and works there takes on the name of the workshop along with their personal name," she explained. "It would be more accurate for me to introduce myself as Rike from the Moritz Workshop."

It seemed like a similar custom to taking on a tribe or village name.

"My name is Eizo, and this is Samya," I said.

Samya glanced at me askew, probably because I hadn't introduced myself as Eizo Tanya. I didn't particularly mind telling Rike my family name, but I didn't know if there were any eavesdroppers. It would be a pain if anyone else overheard. Giving out a family name in this world was just asking for trouble.

"Pleasure," Samya said brusquely with no sincerity whatsoever.

"The pleasure is all mine," Rike replied. "Eizo...no, Master Eizo, are you from the north?"

"My birthplace? That's a long story," I said, "but right now I live and work out in the Black Forest."

"Oh, I see..." She paused, absorbed in thought.

"Anything the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, no, I was just wondering why I'd never seen a blacksmith with your skill around here before."

I made a noncommittal noise and took a small sip of my wine. It was cut with water, so the taste was only so-so. Contrary to my appearance, I was actually weak to alcohol.

In any case, I wasn't surprised by her train of thought. Normal blacksmiths wouldn't have set up shop in the middle of the forest. Riverside workshops were apparently popular because a waterwheel could be set up to power an automatic hammer, a tool similar to a hydraulic press used for forging back on Earth. Well, my workshop had been prepared for me, so I had no right to complain.

"I'd be grateful if you didn't ask too many questions about my background," I said.

"I understand," she easily agreed. "That's not what I'm here for anyway."

"Can you tell me a little more about this apprentice business?" I asked to steer the conversation back on track.

"Right, yes. It's a long story..." she said and took a large swig from her stein. "I recently left my family's workshop along with my younger brothers. You see, when dwarves come of age, we're expected to leave the nest to train and polish our skills. We visit other blacksmith shops in order to find a place where we want to apprentice. After the apprenticeship, we're meant to bring the knowledge and skills back to our family workshop to develop new products, and then the cycle begins anew."

Huh, that certainly wasn't mentioned anywhere in the installed data. I guess the lifestyles of different races weren't contained in the data, just like how the details about various animals' lives weren't anywhere to be found. It was more fun discovering it for myself though.

"Aren't the workshops that take in apprentices worried about revealing their trade secrets? They don't refuse you?" I asked.

"No, generally not. It's seen as an honor for a dwarf to ask to apprentice at a workshop. As long as the apprenticeship goes smoothly, it's a mutually beneficial relationship," she explained.

This kind of practice was likely unfamiliar to anyone outside of the trade, which is probably why people had been so curious when Rike had asked to be my apprentice back in the market. That said, any blacksmith would definitely understand the significance, so the smiths within the city walls would've been envious if they'd known. I'd made the right choice to get us out of there.

At the tail end of that train of thought was a question: had Marius actually been watching out for me earlier? Well, I'd settle my debt with him some other time.

"My brothers and I arrived here three days ago," she continued. "I just happened to see the soldier from earlier when he was using his knife, and I asked him where I could find its maker. I'd assumed it was a blacksmith within the city, and I'd told him that I wanted to try for an apprenticeship."

"Hmmm, I see. So, *I* was the blacksmith in question."

"Yes. However, he knew neither your name nor where you lived, only that you came to the Open Market once a week. He said you'd be back in three days or so, since he'd seen you four days prior."

"Right, that's what my schedule is like for now."

"I've sent my brothers on ahead to continue their own journeys. Seeing the longsword today with my own eyes has only reinforced my conviction to become your apprentice and learn the craft from you."

"Okay, I understand," I said, after processing her words fully. "Huh? Wait a second... Your brothers aren't here anymore?"

"No, they each have workshops that they want to study at as well," she said with an open and somewhat mischievous grin.

"So, if I were to turn you down..."

"Well, then I'd just have to continue my search alone. A woman on the road, all by myself."

That was too risky. I knew I was playing right into her hands, but what choice did I have? Guess I was too softhearted.

"All right," I said, sighing softly. "I'll take you on as my apprentice."

Next to me, Samya huffed loudly. *Sorry, but you probably already knew that this was going to happen, right?*

"Are you really sure?!"

"Yes, but I have four conditions."

“O-Okay. What are they?” Rike sat up straight and listened attentively.

“Number one. I dislike self-sacrificing behavior. Please don’t act like you did today again.”

“I understand,” she said, nodding.

“Two. There’s not enough space for the three of us in the cabin. The first thing you’ll do is help us build more rooms.”

“All right. No problem,” she said. “When any family that’s part of the Moritz Workshop has a child, everyone pitches in to build another room.”

“Three. This one overlaps with the second, but you’ll have to help out with chores around the cabin, not just with tasks related to smithing.”

“Of course. That’s what it means to be an apprentice.”

“And finally, four.”

“Yes?”

“Stop speaking so formally,” I said. “I plan on calling you Rike, so you should call me Eizo.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly do that, Boss!” she immediately protested.

Samya looked dumbfounded next to me, and I shared her feelings. In a daze, I could only parrot back, “B-Boss...?”

“Yes,” she confirmed earnestly. “Since I will be your apprentice, it’s only natural for me to call you ‘Boss’ out of respect!”

That was the last straw for Samya, and she cracked up. *I’m going to remember this!*

That was how I gained an apprentice long before I thought I would have one.

Rike wanted to come back with us right away. I’d offered to return to town and pick her up tomorrow, but she insisted on today. I agreed, and Rike went to pack her stuff right away. The sun would set if we dragged our feet and stayed in the city for too much longer.

Fortunately—if that was the right word—Rike had been prepared to leave

here at any moment, so her belongings were already more or less squared away. She soon came down from the second floor with everything she had. But...

I looked at her sidelong, then asked, "Is that bag going to last?"

"Yes," she said with confidence. "It made it all the way here, at least."

On her back, Rike was wearing a rucksack half her size. It was obvious that it'd been patched up in numerous places, maybe while she'd been on the road. No matter how I felt about it, Rike was right when she'd said that it had gotten her this far, so it was good enough to take with her now too.

"Suppose I can't argue with that," I said. "All right then, let's go. We don't want to be on the road after dark, whether Samya is guarding us or not."

"You got it, Boss!" she said, filled with energy. *I'll have to make her stop calling me that one of these days...*

The three of us hurried out of the city, making good time despite having dallied for a drink. Rike had drunk the most and was carrying a huge rucksack, but she was perfectly steady on her feet. Was that a dwarf trait?

We arrived at the edge of the forest twenty minutes quicker than usual. I turned to Rike. "We'll be heading into the forest now. Make sure you stay close to us."

"Yes, Boss," she responded.

Then Samya cut in and said, "If you do get lost, I'll go and find you. Don't yell or shout, because who knows what you'll attract."

"O-Okay. I understand."

"We'll take a break after an hour," I said. "Hang on until then."

"Yes!" Rike said, and we headed into the forest.

Rike showed no signs of tension or fear, but she did stumble over the occasional tree root or patch of weeds since she wasn't used to walking in the forest. Even so, she never fell behind. The hour passed quickly and soon it was time for the promised break.

I made sure to check in on Rike's condition while we rested. "Do your feet hurt or anything, Rike? Tell us if they do."

"No, my feet are fine," she replied.

"Don't push yourself too much, because it's dangerous," I cautioned. "If you feel like something's off, you have to tell us right away."

"Okay, Boss, I understand."

We set off again and arrived at the cabin after another hour. Rike was neither weary with exhaustion nor did she complain about pain in her feet. Were all dwarves so tough, or was it just Rike? She had said that she'd been traveling with her brothers this whole time, so it could be that she was used to a lot of walking.

It was almost dusk. The cabin stood in the dwindling light, and I pointed to it. "This is my home and workshop."

"Woow," Rike gushed, her eyes sparkling. "It's big."

"I guess so," I said. It was big enough to startle me when it appeared out of nowhere, at least. "Are your feet still all right?" I asked.

"Yes, they are! The trek wasn't as tough as I'd expected."

"Good. Let's go in." I unlocked the door and swung it open.

Rike ran inside with an enthusiastic "Don't mind if I do!"

Samya went to follow, but I stopped her. "Samya," I said.

"Hm? What's up?"

"Thanks."

Midway through our journey home, I'd noticed that Samya had picked a route for us that was easy to walk, one where we wouldn't be likely to run into any wild animals.

"Oh, right..." she said, looking down bashfully. Still flustered, she stepped into the house.

It was cute when Rike called me "Boss" with a big smile on her face, but this side of Samya tugged at my heartstrings too.

I had Rike and Samya freshen up from the journey in the bedroom while I did the same in the study. Then I fixed up a quick dinner, and we all sat down to eat.

We made small talk for a while before I broke in with a topic that was on my mind. “Rike, we’re happy to have you, but there aren’t any extra rooms. For the time being, you and Samya will have to share the bedroom.”

“What? No, far be it for me to intrude on your shared space,” she protested. “I have everything I need to camp outdoors. Point me to an area where I can set up, and that will be plenty.”

“Samya and I already sleep separately,” I told her. “This arrangement wouldn’t be much different.”

Samya used the bedroom, and I was still sleeping in the study. Samya had offered to switch several times already, but I’d turned her down every time.

You might be wondering how I sleep in the study. The answer is, wrapped in a blanket at the desk. Surprisingly, I was always able to fall soundly asleep. It’s sad to say, but my experience working for an exploitative black corporation was coming in handy.

In response to my explanation, Rike said, “The two of you sleep apart even though you’re married?”

“Pwht—” Samya spat out her tree deer soup before I could even react. I was sitting directly across from her, and I quickly dodged the spattering liquid assault.



“I-I-I-I-I-Idiot! What are you talking about! Me and Eizo aren’t like that!” Samya protested with her face flaming red.

“Really? I was positive you were a couple.” Rike said, baffled by Samya’s vehement denial. “When I first approached the two of you, Lady Samya, you moved to cover Boss without any hesitation, and even as we were talking, the two of you kept communicating through glances. I can tell that the Boss is putting in a lot of consideration for you when he talks too.”

It hadn’t even been a month since Samya and I had first met, but we’d spent every day together. At some point, we’d started to understand each other without needing the words to be spoken out loud. Samya was particularly quick to pick up on my emotions.

Still, even though it was a natural evolution from how much time we’d spent together, it was a little embarrassing that Rike had picked up on it. She didn’t seem particularly concerned, so I gathered that interracial marriages weren’t rare in this world. That was definitely a blessing.

“Anywaaay,” I said, “there’s nothing going on between me and Samya right now.”

“Right now?!” Samya exclaimed before Rike even had a chance to speak. A fierce blush bloomed over her cheeks.

“That wasn’t the point!” I backtracked, explaining that I only added that last bit because no mortal could possibly know what was going to happen in the future. Samya nodded and curled up in her chair. Did that mean she’d accepted my explanation?

“In any case,” I continued, “the two of us are like family—nothing more, nothing less.”

“You’re workshop mates,” Rike declared.

“Right, that’s the idea,” I said. I guess workshop mates were the same as family to dwarves.

I glanced at Samya. She had composed herself and was now sipping her soup quietly, huddled up on herself. Was she upset?

I wanted to wrap up the original conversation about sleeping space, so I said, “In conclusion, the bedroom will be the women’s quarters, and the study will be the men’s. As the owner of the cabin and the head of the workshop, what I say goes. There will be no changes permitted.”

“All right,” Rike said.

At the same time, Samya said, “Kay.”

They were probably dissatisfied, but I’d made my decision. I sighed to relieve my own tension. “You only have to put up with it until we finish building your rooms.”

“Oh, I meant to ask,” Rike said, “do you already have the wood?”

“Yes, we have everything we need...I think. The planks should be dry soon, so we can begin as soon as tomorrow.”

“I understand!” Rike said.

“Cool,” added Samya.

And just like that, we were now officially a household of three.

###

After breakfast the next day, Samya went out hunting and brought a lunch box with her. As she was heading out, I slipped her a subtle request: “It sure would be nice if you caught another tree deer today...” I was really looking forward to seeing what she brought back.

But, onto business. Rike and I first checked the wooden planks that I’d prepared two weeks earlier.

“Today, we’re going to start building the new rooms with these planks. I expect the construction to take a while to complete,” I told Rike. “We’ll work on the rooms in the morning and spend the afternoon blacksmithing in the workshop.”

“I understand,” Rike said.

“Shall we get started then?”

“Yes, Boss!” Rike sounded energetic, and we began our work for the day.

According to Samya, earthquakes were rare in this region, and the atmosphere was dry. In fact, it hadn't rained once in the time that I'd been here. This climate was similar to Germany's back on Earth. Germany even had its own Black Forest, though it was called Schwarzwald locally.

Anyway, enough of that tangent. The point was that we wouldn't be needing stone footings for the structural columns because of the low humidity—we could just plant the columns directly into the soil.

Fun fact: it was so humid in Japan that the Ise Grand Shrine had to be rebuilt every twenty years. However, our cabin's foundation should have no problem lasting longer than that, especially considering that we were only building a house for our personal use. I was pretty confident in our plan of execution.

The first step was to dig the holes for the pillars. I tweaked one of the hoes I'd forged previously by reorienting the bladed head. The tip of the hoe was mounted in the classic position, perpendicular to the handle, so I switched it to a parallel position instead. This way, the tool resembled more of a shovel.

The soil around the house was compact and hard. I'd meant to ask Samya if it was the same throughout the whole forest, but it'd slipped my mind. If it weren't for my boosted physical ability and the makeshift but surprisingly decent shovel, the soil would've been quite difficult to scoop. I was filled with gratitude for my tools and the strength I'd been blessed with, as well as for the magical being that had made all of this possible.

After a short while, I managed to dig a rather deep hole. Now, it was ready for the planks. Rike and I combined our strength, put our backs into it, and pulled one of the pieces of timber with a rope, right up to the edge of the hole. Once we moved it far enough, the timber tipped over the lip on its own and fell upright into the hole with a *thwump*.

Then, I encircled the standing lumber with both arms, lifted it slightly off the ground, and used the log to pound the bottom of the pit, which compacted the soil even further. Once that was done, I held the lumber while Rike filled the hole back up to support the column.

We repeated the process over and over again all throughout the morning. By noon, we erected enough columns for two rooms, but they were still a bit

wobbly in the holes. We'd have to reinforce them, but that could wait until tomorrow.

In the afternoon, we moved on to the highly anticipated blacksmithing lesson. I'd planned for Rike to help me make entry-level longswords since I hadn't gotten a chance to forge any yet.

Before we broke for lunch, we made two molds, and after eating, we started the forging process. I worked the fire and bellows manually (both of which had usually been operated by magic when I'd been alone), and Rike melted the iron and forged the swords. As expected of someone who'd left her home to pursue her passion for learning, there was no hesitation in her movements. Soon, she had both molds filled to the brim.

While we waited for the iron to cool, I decided that we should forge a few knives as well. I would first demonstrate my process and then have Rike repeat what I'd done. Since my smithing skills were actually cheats, this was the only way I knew how to "teach" her. We were only making the entry-level model today, so I didn't even have to put much effort into it. I felt bad that I couldn't aid in her education beyond letting her watch me work so she could steal my techniques.

I picked up a piece of metal and heated it in the firebed. When it was at the right temperature, I shaped it with the hammer. This was work I could do in my sleep. Rike watched me intently the entire time, not glancing away even for a moment.

When I finished, I turned to her. "So? Did you learn anything valuable?"

"Yes. You're the real deal, Boss! It's like you can hear the voice of the iron," she exclaimed. "But you're still holding back, aren't you?"

"You can tell?"

"Of course I can. You look like you're barely trying. Besides, this knife is a far cry from the longsword you showed me yesterday."

Oh, riiight. I forgot she'd seen the elite model yesterday.

"Well, this is all I have to show you today," I said, "but I'll demonstrate the

forging of a higher-quality blade tomorrow.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yes. You’re my apprentice after all. There’s no reason for me to keep anything from you. But today, we have to work on replenishing the stock of merchandise.”

She looked like she was going to float away from sheer happiness any moment now. “Thank you so much, Boss!”

“It’s your turn now, Rike.”

“All right!” she said before beginning to work.

She heated the iron in the firebed and shaped it just like I had. As she worked, she cut quite an imposing figure. Perhaps it was because she was a dwarf.

Eventually, a knife took shape from the bar of heated metal. She held it up before me with the tongs and asked, “How does it look?”

It was nearly indistinguishable from the entry-level knife I had forged. Nearly.

When she’d first flattened the metal after heating it, there’d been a few spots that had been left uneven. How do I put it... The composition of the iron itself was very subtly...*off*, in places. When I worked with metal, I made sure that the texture was uniform all over and that any irregularities were evenly dispersed. That minute difference was what delineated my cheat abilities from Rike’s innate skills.

When all was said and done, I was positive that, with her ability, Rike could learn to forge high-caliber items that were as good as the elite models that I made.

I told her as much. “Very well done, but there’s still room for you to grow. I’m sorry that I’m not a very good teacher. You’ll have to steal my techniques for yourself, but in time, you’ll definitely be able to make the longsword you saw yesterday.”

“Thank you!” she replied, buoyant and with a big grin plastered on her face. “I won’t let you down!”

I also showed her the longsword I’d made, but it was just the entry-level

model. Rike said, "It's beautiful in its own way, but it can't compare to the one you let me see yesterday."

Since we were going to be forging an elite model tomorrow, we made the mold in advance as our last task of the day. Samya returned just as we were banking the fire. We'd finished making the mold and had left it out to dry.

"I'm home," she announced.

"Welcome back," I replied. "How was your hunt?"

She smiled like a cat that had gotten some cream. "I took down a whopper of a tree deer," she boasted. "Don't be too shocked when you see it."

"Good for you! Did you leave it in the lake again?"

"Yeah. It won't taste good if I don't drain the blood properly and chill it," she said with a grimace. It seemed as if she was speaking from experience.

Back when it had been just the two of us, if Samya had caught and preserved a massive tree deer, it would've been more than enough meat. In fact, we might've struggled to finish it before it turned. However, with an extra mouth to feed, we'd need to stock up on more food, so we should have no problems finishing off the deer she caught today.

"I'll prepare dinner. The two of you can join me after you wash up," I said.

"Okay," Samya replied.

At the same time, Rike said, "Understood."

We were almost out of root vegetables, so for dinner, we had a barley porridge with meat and beans. It consisted of more protein than anything, but it was perfect sustenance for the active lifestyles we all led.

"Rike, why don't you join us when we bring the deer back tomorrow?" I suggested as we ate.

"Are you sure you want me to come along?" she asked.

"Of course. An extra set of hands would be a big help."

"I'm happy to assist, of course!"

"We're counting on you then."

One of these days, I might have the two of them go by themselves. I reasoned that it would be good for Rike to be exposed to the work now.

Rike soon changed the subject. “Boss, I have a question for you.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“Shouldn’t we restock the iron, charcoal, and other supplies?” she asked. “Is there a supplier you already work with?”

“You’re right...” I replied.

Now that she mentioned it, I realized that the iron, steel, and wood charcoal reserves were getting rather low. The supplies weren’t so limited that they’d run out today or tomorrow, but we had less than I’d like.

I’d been using the raw materials that had already been stocked when I first arrived, and because of this, I’d been able to turn a one hundred percent profit on my sales so far. However, I’d soon have to start considering the prices of smithing supplies. It might be more profitable to start selling elite models, as they would yield a higher dividend with the same production cost.

Regardless, the first order of business was to secure the raw materials.

As for Rike’s other question, I answered, “I’ve only just started my business recently, so I don’t have a supplier yet. The materials we have will last another month if we reeeally stretch it.”

“We’ll need to find a supplier before we run out then, right?” Rike asked.

“Yeah. Next time we head into town, I’ll ask Marius if he knows anybody.”

“I’ll ask around too,” she volunteered.

“That would be a great help.”

I guess we’ll just have to wait and see what cards are dealt to us.

Oh right, there was something I meant to ask Samya.

“Samya,” I said, catching her attention.

“Hm?”

“How were the arrows?”

“Absolutely stellar!” she gushed. “Normal arrows can’t even pierce the hide of a mature tree deer. When one grows to that size, the skin on its back gets really tough and hard. With your arrows though, taking one down is no problem at all!”

“Good,” I said. “By the way, last time you mentioned that you leave out all of the organs besides the heart, right? Do you bury the heart?”

“Yeah, in the earth of the forest,” she confirmed.

“Is there a special reason why?”

“So its soul will return to the forest and be rebirthed anew,” she explained.

“Whoa, I see.”

It was similar to the beliefs of people from prehistoric times back on Earth.

Rike also nodded in appreciation at the new discovery. From her reaction, I inferred that this was a custom unique to the beastfolk who lived in the forest.

I didn’t know if gods actually existed in this world, but there were definitely people who believed in them. That said, I’d yet to encounter any zealous practitioners here. The religious culture seemed relaxed and open.

I’d grown up with Japan’s religious practices, and Samya partook in the beastfolk’s spiritual beliefs. However, neither of us was deeply interested in religion. There was also a church in the city, but we’d never been. It was beyond the city walls anyway, so it would be hard to visit, even if we wanted to.

But I digress. Time to focus on the matter at hand.

“Samya, you’ll be free after you butcher the tree deer, right? Do you want to help out with the forging?”

“Yeah...if you don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

Throughout the conversation, I’d set it up so that Samya would eventually be able to help Rike with her work and vice-versa. Once they were comfortable helping each other, I’d be able to focus on my own tasks. Plus, if something were to happen to me—god forbid—I wanted them to be able to continue on

by themselves. That was my personal wish, but we'd have to see what happened from here on out.

The next morning, our first course of action was a trip to the lake. I brought along the water jugs and ax, since we'd have to make another carrying rack and we'd need wood to build it.

When Rike spied the ax, she exclaimed, "B-B-Boss! You didn't show me this before!"

"Oh, what? This ax?" I replied offhandedly. It just hadn't been relevant until now.

"It's beautiful!" Rike said, overflowing with excitement. If I'd known how happy she'd be, I would've shown her yesterday.

"Want to give it a try?"

"Can I?!"

"Yeah, but it's really sharp, so be careful," I warned her.

"I will!"

I handed the ax over, and she took her place in front of a tree. With the ax in hand, she looked exactly like a stereotypical depiction of a dwarf from my previous world.

"Here I go!" she said, before taking a big swing at the tree.

Thwack! The satisfying sound rang out around us, but the tree didn't look like it'd been affected at all.

Rike was dumbstruck. "Huh?"

"Get away from there! It's dangerous!" I called out.

"What? O-Okay!" She quickly stepped back. Then, she turned to me and said, "The hit made a sound, but I didn't feel any impact in my hands at all."

Yeaah. It's shocking, isn't it? I understood exactly what she was thinking.

"That's just how it is," I replied. "Anyway, it's about time..."

“Hm?” she said, turning back toward the tree. At that moment, it began to slide off its trunk at the exact point where she’d chopped with the ax. It tilted away from us and crashed to the ground.

“Whaaaaat?!” Rike shouted, shocked.

“Yeah, it’s something else, isn’t it?” Samya said, voicing her sympathy. “I was a little repulsed when I first saw that with my own eyes...but Eizo just stood there, with the same expression he always wears.”

I see. So that’s what she’d been thinking...

“Anyway,” I cut in, “that’s how that ax chops, so take care when you use it.”

“U-Understood,” Rike said. She looked nervous, but she quickly cut down three more trees and segmented them into logs. It seemed like she’d gotten the hang of it.

“You work quick,” I told her.

“I’ve done similar work in the past.”

She’d previously mentioned assisting with building expansions to her family’s workshop, so she must’ve had to chop down trees for that.

Together, we used a few ropes to tie the lumber into a carrying rack. “That just about does it. It’s time to load the deer on!” I called to Samya.

She splashed her way into the lake and waded out farther, to where the water was quite deep. Since Samya and I were taller, we could stand in those depths, but it might be too deep for Rike.

“Can you wait here, Rike?”

“Yes,” she replied.

I made my way over to where Samya was waiting alongside a truly gigantic deer. By my estimate, it was more than two meters tall.

“It’s huge!” I exclaimed.

“Right? When I injured it the first time, it still managed to run away. It took a while before I was finally able to bring it down.”

“I can imagine.”

A deer this size... It would've been hard just carrying it here and sinking it in the lake, let alone actually hunting it down. I was genuinely impressed and told Samya as much. "It must've been quite the feat. Impressive!"

She smiled and chuckled at my compliment.

Samya and I tugged the deer into the shallows where Rike was waiting. From there, Rike helped us pull as well, so we dragged it onto shore before too long. We pushed the deer onto the rack and tied it into place. I refilled the water jugs and lashed those to the rack as well. We were now ready to transport it all back to the cabin. With all three of us pulling the rack, we made it back in half an hour.

Next came the butchering.

Like before, we had to string it up, but because of the deer's sheer size, it was difficult to hoist. Somehow we managed it, and Samya and I used our knives to skin the deer. The work itself was exactly the same as before, but Rike's reaction to seeing the elite model knives made the time fly by.

Since Samya and I were experienced at using these knives in our day-to-day chores, we wouldn't trim off any meat accidentally while skinning. However, we did have a few close calls: a few almost-punctures through the skin, or nearly nicking organs like the bladder, gallbladder, and large intestine when taking out the innards. If we damaged those organs, the meat would be ruined.

Despite the size of the deer, we were able to break it down quickly. In twenty minutes, we turned the body into a large, neat heap of meat.

"This is enough to feed the three of us for at least two weeks, even if we really gorge ourselves!" I said. "Thanks, Samya."

"Th-That's great! I'll catch another one for us when we run out!" Samya said delightedly.

I set aside a portion of the meat for our meals today, and the rest I divided into two piles. One half we'd dry, the other we'd cure. I had Rike help me prep the meat to dry in the workshop, just like I'd done last time.

"When I first came into the workshop, I wondered why there was meat drying in here," Rike said. "So this is the reason..."

“I’d like to build a smokehouse someday and dry the meat in there.” I would also love a charcoal hut where I could hide if there were an emergency. Y’know, like Kira Yoshinaka did during the incident with the forty-seven ronin..

Soon it was time for lunch, so I cooked some barley porridge with venison steak as a special treat. I only seasoned the steak with salt, but it still turned out delicious. While eating, we had a spirited discussion about venison versus boar meat.

“Dwarves eat five meals a day,” was just a perpetuated stereotype. In fact, their eating habits were quite similar to a human’s. They could eat quite a lot considering their small statures, but the actual amount of food wasn’t anything outrageous. Overall, their daily meals were the same size or slightly larger than my own, so it was only considered “a lot” of food relative to their size.

I had come to understand that well during the first meal that Rike ate with us after arriving at the cabin.

Here’s what took place that day, a little before our discussion about sleeping quarters.

I had made an extra portion for Rike. Without thinking about it, I’d prepared the same amount for her as what Samya and I usually ate.

“Sorry, you don’t have to eat it all,” I’d told her when I served the food.

Rike had only replied with a casual “it’s fine.”

I had been expecting her usual chipper response of “I understand!” so I felt a little blindsided. I suppose it would’ve been a weird response for the situation though. That must’ve been why she’d answered the way she did...or so I’d thought.

Actually, she had easily gobbled up her portion, along with Samya’s and my leftovers.

“You’re not forcing yourself, are you?” I’d asked, just to be sure, though that didn’t seem like the case at all.

As I’d expected, with a complete look of puzzlement on her face, she’d

responded, “Forcing myself to do what?”

Samya and I could only exchange a look between us. What more was there to say?

Back to the present. After the three of us finished eating—one of us, very heartily, and the other two normally—it was time for smithing. The mold from yesterday was ready, and all we had to do today was fill it with melted iron.

I lit a fire in the forge using my magic.

Rike watched me, then spoke. “Boss, you can do magic as well? I noticed you using magic when you cooked lunch earlier too.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I can only do simple things.”

Samya, who was standing next to Rike, barged her way into the conversation. “Isn’t it amazing? Blacksmithing *and* magic!” she boasted. “Eizo has a family name too, you know?”

Wait a second. Why is she the one who gets to brag?

Rike turned to me. “Oh, is that true?”

“Y-Yeah. It’s complicated,” I responded. “Sorry I didn’t tell you earlier. When we first talked back in the city, I was worried that someone would overhear and spread it around.”

“Don’t worry. You have nothing to apologize for. I understand.”

Samya wore a smug grin. *Okay, okay, you’re proud. I get it already.*

“What is your family name?” Rike asked.

“It’s Tanya.”

“Tanya. I see. Then, that makes me Rike Tanya.”

“That—” I started to say.

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Samya sputtered out before I could finish my sentence. We were on the same wavelength.

“If Boss’s family name is Tanya, that means this is Tanya Forge. Dwarves take

on the name of their workshop, so as your apprentice, naturally my name becomes Rike Tanya.”

It made sense when she laid it out like that, but I just had to push back. “It’s complicated,” I repeated. “If it’s really important to you, we can name the workshop after my first name. Forge Eizo.”

“I understand. Then, I’ll call myself Rike Eizo.”

Regardless of whether it was a dwarven custom or not, it was awkward for me to have a woman take on my name so casually.

That was what I was thinking when Samya burst out with, “No fair! I want to have your name too!”

“Ummm...” was all I managed to get out.

What is this woman saying?

“I’m going to introduce myself as Samya Tanya or Samya Eizo from now on!” she declared. “You don’t mind, right?!”

“Uhhh,” I droned, articulate as ever.

Rike was following a dwarven tradition. If dwarves were accustomed to using workshop names like they were family names, what was I supposed to do? In Samya’s case though, I was pretty sure that the beastfolk didn’t have any such custom...

But of course, I had no reason to deny her. She was already like family to me, and I was the one who’d asked her to live with me.

“Sure, why not?” I said.

“Score!” Samya exclaimed before breaking into a happy jig.

I hadn’t planned to leave anything behind in this world after I passed, other than items and trinkets. I *was* a guest here after all. I had to admit, “Mirage Workshop Eizo” had a nice ring to it.

While we’d been talking, the forge had reached a good temperature. I put in some iron and also stoked the firebed, since it would take time for the ore to melt all the way through.

With both the forge and the firebed lit, the workshop was now sweltering. I began to sweat profusely. Blacksmithing was the reason why I had to be diligent about refilling our water supply every day—I had to stay hydrated.

Once the ore liquified, we poured the molds. Samya filled the mold that I'd made, and Rike filled the one she'd made herself. Afterward, I banked the fire in the forge.

I picked up a plate of metal and thrust it into the firebed, which I'd kept burning. I'd originally planned to make an elite model knife today, but I decided to make it a custom model instead. This would be a good opportunity for Rike to watch and learn. I wanted to try out fancier techniques as well, like steel folding, but I'd save that for when a client ordered a custom knife.

The process for making a custom model was identical to the one for making an elite model, so I made sure to focus all of my attention on the knife. I carefully hammered the metal into shape and then heated it to juuust the right temperature before quenching it. At the end, when I sharpened it, I paid close attention to every difference in sensation passing through my fingertips.

“Brilliant! Absolutely astounding! I can't believe this was made by a human. Even dwarves couldn't make something so perfect!” Rike exclaimed, unable to hold back her excitement. She had eyes for nothing except smithing.



“This knife is yours, Rike,” I said. In short order, I had made a simple sheath, slid the knife into it, and handed the set to her.

“Are you sure?!” she asked.

“Yes, it’s too sharp to sell. Plus, now that you’re my apprentice, we’re pretty much family,” I explained. “Be careful with it though.”

“I understand. I’ll do my best so I can make knives as fine as this one in the future!”

“Yeah, I know you can do it.”

Man, custom models sure take a while to make. Like, one and a half or two times as long as an entry-level model. Even elite models took more or less the same time as an entry-level one. In the future, we’d have to take the cost of the raw materials into account as well. From that perspective, it might make more sense for me to continue making elite models, while Rike practiced making entry-level models.

After that, Rike tried her hand at it. In terms of skill, we were about equal, but there were certainly some minor flaws in her final product.

The knife was weak in places where the metal had been unevenly distributed. Those spots would be the first to falter over time, and the knife would become brittle. The weak parts would also have less cutting ability.

Through my cheat abilities and installed wisdom, I could innately tell where I had to hit the metal to make it perfectly uniform and in the exact shape I wanted. Moreover, even if I wasn’t trying, I could still hammer the metal into a flawless product.

Cheats were cheats.

In fact, before I’d given the custom model knife to Rike, I’d taken a close look at it. I’d really put a lot of effort into it, and the metal had seemed like it was almost glowing. It was undeniably in a different class from your average knife; normally, a steel knife wouldn’t be able to cut through a log. That feat should’ve been impossible, even for a knife made with the highest quality steel from my

previous world.

Something wasn't quite lining up with the common sense I'd retained from living on Earth. However, I couldn't tell what exactly that "something" was. Those details weren't included in the data.

Foiled again! If only the data was more comprehensive when it came to the nitty-gritty.

In any case, based on what I knew from my cheat abilities, I explained to Rike how to adjust her technique to fix the knife she'd been working on. She listened attentively. I felt conflicted at seeing how hard she was working, considering that she actually had way more experience than I did.

Next came the longsword.

I had Samya assist with the casting. "Helping you with smithing is fun," Samya said as she worked. "Super fun."

"Really? You're free to join in and help whenever you have time," I offered.

"Great!"

Once the longsword had cooled, I took over hammering out the imperfections in the blade. Unlike the knife, we were using cast iron for the longsword, but the process itself didn't change much. I shaped the blade with care in order to produce a high-caliber product, hammering the surface until the metal was even throughout. I had to concentrate since this was going to be an elite model sword, not an entry-level one.

When I showed the longsword to Rike, she said, "Aaah, this is the same quality as the one you showed me the day we met."

"That's right. I made them to the same standard."

"It didn't seem like you put in that much effort when making it though," Rike commented.

"Oh! Yes, now that you've seen my ax and knife, you can probably tell. As you pointed out, I didn't have to use my full ability to make this sword."

Upon hearing my response, she shifted her gaze to my hands and stared at them without responding. The workshop descended into silence, except for the

crackling of the fire.

“Boss, what in the world...” she muttered eventually. “Never mind. I knew I’d have to climb mountains in my apprenticeship, but now I understand just how high I need to go.”

Judging by her expression, I could tell that she’d made a resolution. I was going to ask her about it, but if she was aiming for the level I’d obtained through my cheats, the mountain was indeed tall. Endlessly tall. Regardless, I would do all that I could to help her toward where she wanted to go.

By the end of the day, we’d made four knives—one custom model and three entry-level models—and two longswords. If we kept this up, we’d have plenty of stock for the next time we went into town.

###

We spent the next four mornings building out the new rooms, with Samya also helping whenever she wasn’t hunting.

After reinforcing the foundational columns with diagonal braces, we laid out the structural beams. We positioned joists in places that would need flooring and installed floorboards on top. At the same time, we built out a hallway between the new rooms and the existing cabin structure.

The exterior walls of the rooms would become the new exterior walls of the cabin. This way, any rooms we built would continue to get natural light. In the future, if we needed to, we could lay out new rooms in a square with a central courtyard and extend the hallway to wrap around.

One day, if we needed even more rooms than that, we might have to hire workers to build a second floor—or maybe, we’d rebuild the cabin ourselves. But only if it came to that. I had no plans to expand the house to that extent, but of course, I hadn’t planned for Samya or Rike to join me either. Better safe than sorry and all that jazz.

In these four days, Samya brought back four birds from her hunts, so we ate like royalty every day. She said she didn’t catch anything bigger because she was having too much fun with construction and smithing. The birds were easy for me to cook anyway.

We spent the afternoons in the workshop. In total, we made fourteen knives and six longswords, so we now had plenty of stock. Once we sold these, we'd have to buy more vegetables, charcoal, and ore with the proceeds.

###

The next day, the three of us set out for the city. It was Rike's first town outing since she'd joined us. We made fast progress, took a short break on the road, and soon arrived safely. Marius was once again stationed at the entrance.

"Well, well, look who it is," he greeted us.

"Hello," I replied.

"So, you guys come about once a week, right?" he asked.

"That's right."

"Hmmm..."

"What is it?" I prompted.

"Nothing much," he said. "There are just a few people wanting to buy longswords and knives. They've asked me for your contact information."

"Oh, I see."

We'd been coming to sell at the Open Market once every week, but we hadn't been keeping a strict schedule. We weren't guaranteed to be here every, say, Monday, if I were to use the example of business days from my old world.

However, I didn't want to lose any customers because of our unusual schedule. "I'll have to think about that. We don't have a storefront where customers can go directly. Maybe we can work with a distributor or middleman."

"Please do. It'd be beneficial for you too," Marius replied.

"True. Thank you for telling me," I said, bowing my head as a show of gratitude.

Marius waved it off.

This was a crossroad I was bound to reach sooner or later. I'd yet to figure out where to sell the elite model products, and now that Rike was helping me out

with the smithing, we'd be making more items than we would be able to sell in one day.

I also had to think about where to resupply the charcoal and ore. It'd be best to restock the raw materials on a fixed schedule, but we might have to secure a place to store them until we could come to collect them in person.

We owned a store of sorts, but since it also doubled as our living space, it lacked an air of legitimacy. From that perspective, a partnership with the merchants here in town was starting to make a lot of sense. Plus, we wouldn't have to keep making these trips back and forth. They ate up an entire day, after all. The benefits to that sales model were endless. Maybe this was the future of our workshop.

I kept strategizing as we walked past the entrance and entered the Open Market. I was in the process of setting up the counter when someone approached—it was the traveling merchant who'd bought several longswords from me.

"Hey, you're back," I called out to him. "We're not open quite yet."

"I can tell just by looking." He appeared sheepish and was scratching his head. "Actually, I had something to discuss with you."

"With me?"

"Yeah. I'll be setting up shop here soon," he said. "And I don't mean a booth in the Open Market. A real shop."

"Wow, congratulations!" I told him, filled with genuine delight at his news.

"Thanks," the traveling merchant responded. Well, I guess he was just your run-of-the-mill merchant now. He still looked bashful. "Anyway, I'm planning to sell a hodgepodge of items that I've collected from different places. Since we're outside the city walls, there are no restrictions on what items stores can stock. I'm gonna sell a bit of everything."

"Sounds exciting."

"Right. So, I have a request for you. Would you let me sell your blades and weapons in my shop?"

“Are you serious?” I asked. This was exactly what I’d been thinking over just a moment ago! I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect opportunity, but were wishes supposed to be granted this quickly?

Hmmm, on second thought, maybe Marius had brought the subject up because he already knew this was going to happen. Guards overheard all sorts of things in their day-to-day work. My debts to him were really piling up. *If Marius ever needs me, I’ll do everything in my power to help.*

“Of course I’m serious,” the merchant said in response to my query. “I’m intimately familiar with the quality of your longswords.”

His use of “intimately” made me think he’d used the sword himself. I didn’t have the courage at the moment to ask him for the details.

“I was just thinking about getting myself a distributor,” I said. “If you’re okay with me, I’d be thrilled to work with you.” Truly, what a godsend.

“Great! Thanks,” he said. “Oh, the name’s Camilo, by the way. It’s a pleasure.”

He extended a hand, and I grasped it firmly. “I’m Eizo. I live out in the Black Forest. Don’t ask me why,” I joked. “I can drop off the merchandise once a week. If my trip gets delayed, I’ll give you a heads up. How’s that sound?”



“You live all the way out there? With your skills, you could have your choice of...” Camilo paused and reconsidered his words. “No, never mind. You’re a Nordic man with a past, huh? I won’t pry. You even have a tiger-woman and dwarf along as guards. Quite a rare trio. Your terms work just fine for me.”

“That’s great to hear,” I said. “Now that our negotiations are complete, I have a favor to ask of you too.”

“What is it?”

“I’m running out of iron ore and charcoal, so I’m looking for a supplier. Do you know anyone?”

“I see. I’ll ask around and secure a supply line for you,” he promised.

“It’s not too much trouble?”

“Not at all. I’ll deduct the costs from the price of the goods I get from you. Agreed?”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“Anytime.”

We shook hands spiritedly once again, and just like that, we were in business.

I gave him ten knives and four longswords from the stock I’d brought with me today, as well as an elite model of each, and he paid me in return. I kept four knives and two longswords to sell in my own stall. I couldn’t let the space I’d already secured go to waste.

By the end of the day, I’d sold two knives and one longsword. The latter was bought by one of Marius’s fellow guards. Business was slower than usual. My theory was that most people who were interested in my blades had already bought one. I worried about how well the items I’d given Camilo would sell, but I could only count on him to do his best.

While I manned the counter, Samya and Rike ran errands. They brought back dried root vegetables, salt, and wheat products. On our way out, I intended to give my thanks to Marius, but we didn’t run into him again. I’d have to catch him when we came back, sometime next week.

The return journey was quick since we barely had any baggage. We even shaved half an hour off the trip home. We were all tired from a day of work, so after putting away the food and refreshing ourselves from the trip—albeit, a day trip—we headed to bed early.

###

The day after our trip into town, I asked Samya and Rike to refill the water and work on the cabin extensions. I wanted the new rooms built because I felt bad that Samya and Rike had to share a room this whole time. However, neither of them seemed to mind.

Rike in particular came from a big family, so to speak, since all dwarves who comprise a workshop usually live as one family unit. My two housemates actually seemed more concerned about me and the fact that I'd been sleeping at the desk in the study. That was why they were going along with my proposal. Of course, I didn't really care one way or another about having a bed, but in any case, at least our goals were aligned.

Today, I wouldn't be working with Rike and Samya. Instead, I holed myself up in the workshop as soon as I awoke.

The objective for the day was to test how fast I could work. I planned to make three knives, three shortswords, and three longswords—all elite models—for a total of nine items. The process for making knives and swords was different, but I included this variation intentionally as part of the speed test. It was work, sure, but it also felt like a game. After all, there was nothing wrong with a little fun once in a while.

First, I made the molds for the two types of swords and filled them with molten iron. While I waited for those to cool, I worked on the knives. At the end of the process, I quenched everything and polished the blades. All in all, it took me the entire day to forge everything. I doubt that I could've made so many things in one day had my abilities not been cheats.

After work, I reunited with Samya and Rike.

"I wasn't sure whether to collect you for lunch or not," Samya told me. "You looked so focused."

I would've preferred if she hadn't thought so hard about it... She should've just called me.

"I can't believe you made so many high-quality items in so little time," Rike said. "Blacksmiths around the world are crying, you know."

I wasn't trying to compete with anyone. All I wanted was to live my life in peace.

The next day, I made a few entry-level items as well. I'd discovered that I could raise my smithing pace by a lot when I put my mind to it. So for the time being, my priorities were 1) Make products as fast as possible, and 2) Finish building both rooms!

###

Fast-forward two days.

I had just finished my work. As I was cleaning up and putting out the fire, Samya approached me. "Are you done for today?"

"Yeah," I responded. "I made everything I wanted to."

"Good. Come with me then."

"Sure."

She was buoyant and cheerful as she led me through the cabin; I plodded along behind her. When we reached the living room, I paused. *Something was off*. There was nothing new in the room, but rather, it felt like something was missing.

"Oooh," I said when it finally dawned on me. In the corner of the room by the bedroom, there was a new exit. That change was the culprit behind my initial discomfort. "You finished them?" I'd been focused on my blacksmith work this whole time, so I hadn't been paying any attention to the new part of the house.

"Yup," she confirmed. "The two rooms and the walkway at least."

"Amazing!" I'd known that the build had been coming along smoothly, but I hadn't realized that it would be finished today.

"We've been working our butts off round the clock, only taking breaks to eat,"

Samya explained. "Today too!"

She led me down the hall, and I caught sight of Rike standing at the other end of the corridor.

"Good work, Rike!"

"No, no, it was all Samya," she countered, humble as always.

The hall opened up into the two rooms, and they'd even finished the roofing. However, the rooms were still lacking doors, furniture, and bedding, so only the bare structure was complete. On the flip side, it meant that the rooms would be ready to use as soon as we installed the doors and furnished them. I estimated that it would take no more than another two or three weeks if we were efficient.

"We still have to build the doors and furniture, huh?" I mused out loud.

To my surprise, Rike asked, "We'll be installing doors?" Her expression looked confused, as if I'd said something completely alien.

I uttered a questioning noise. "Of course we will... They're women's rooms."

"Well, in my home, only two types of rooms had doors: the guest rooms and the room for the head of the house and his wife."

I see, I see. So that's how it was. I'd been employing common sense from my previous world and had spoken without thinking. Good thing Rike assumed that I'd been part of a prestigious family.

"That may be the case normally, but this cabin has never been normal. It's already strange for a mere blacksmith's cabin to have a separate bedroom and study, right?" I reasoned. "In any case, it may just be my selfish whim, but I want the rooms of my family and apprentice to have proper doors."

"I have no problem with it, of course," said Rike. "What about you, Samya?"

"No skin off my back. It's not as if I've even lived in a proper house before anyway."

"Right, right..." Rike responded.

"It's decided then. They'll be simple doors, but at least I'll make something

with hinges.” With that, I ended the discussion.

Using my cheat abilities, I’d make short work of the doors, but I presumed that the job was going to take a little more finesse than making weapons or farm equipment. This was the perfect opportunity to see how far my abilities could take me... That was my ulterior motive for building the doors.

After dinner, it was time for bed. I slept in the study as usual, and the women took the bedroom. The newly constructed rooms weren’t usable yet, unfortunately.

Tomorrow, we’d be heading back into the city, but it would be a different trip than usual. I was going to pass off my goods to Camilo, and if he’d already secured a supplier for me, then I could use the money from my products to pay for extra ore and charcoal. With excitement welling up in my chest, I slowly drifted to sleep, feeling almost like an elementary schooler on the night before a field trip.

###

The following morning after I refilled our water supply, Samya, Rike, and I prepared for the day’s journey into town.

“Today, we’ll be dropping off the wares with Camilo and then restocking our ore and charcoal. We also need to buy some salt, but otherwise, we can return home after that. Unless...is there anything else the two of you want to do?” I asked.

“I don’t have anything in mind,” Rike replied.

“Me neither,” Samya said. “I’d rather be in the forest—it’s easier for me to relax here than in the city.”

“If you two say so... Okay, then we’ll come back as soon as we’re done with the errands, and we can do some extra work around the house and workshop instead.”

“Yes, that would be preferable. It’ll be a good opportunity for me to learn, Boss.”

“Mmhmm,” Samya hummed in agreement.

These young women preferred staying at home over a day out in town... I almost wanted to cry. From my perspective—a washed-up old man's perspective, as it were—it seemed a little troubling. But they'd said it, not me, so back home we'd go.

Rike and I split the merchandise between ourselves. As a dwarf, Rike was very tough despite her childlike appearance. Samya's tiger half also made her strong, but we didn't have her carrying anything; as our guard, she needed her hands free.

The three of us headed into the Black Forest. I'd expected that our journey would be quiet like it'd been previously, but Samya had to stop us twice after sensing wolves nearby. It was touch and go for a while, but finally, we stopped to take a break.

"We've run into a surprising amount of wolves today," I said to Samya.

"Yeah, we're nearing the season when their cubs will be born," she explained.

"So they're out to secure food for the mothers?"

"Yup. Next month, you'll start seeing wolves with young cubs. They're really cute. You can't get near them, but you can watch as long as you don't try anything."

"The wolves around here seem rather docile," Rike said.

I'd had the same thought before. At first, I'd assumed that the wolves would go after any human in the forest, but actually, they wouldn't attack unless provoked.

"Mmhmm," Samya confirmed. "Between the tree deer, the grass rabbits, and other animals, there's plenty of prey for the wolves to hunt. And it's easy to corner prey because of how dense the trees are. All in all, hunting's a walk in the park for the wolves in this forest. Also..."

"Also?"

"Me and Eizo are plenty strong. Maybe you too, Rike? However, an average human, like the ones in town, would be the perfect targets because, frankly, they're the weakest prey. I've said before that wolves don't often attack

anything carrying a human scent, but that only applies to the folks who live around this forest.”

“I see. So it would be better for me not to venture out alone,” Rike concluded.

“That’s right. Always bring me or Eizo with you if you go out.”

Although Rike was both tough and plucky, that didn’t necessarily mean that she was a good fighter. It made sense for Samya or me to accompany her in case she had a run-in with a wolf.

“In any case...going to the trouble of securing food for a pregnant mother? Forest wolves are rather noble, aren’t they?” I remarked.

“They’re smart,” Samya said. “Some scholars in the capital claim that one faction of the lupine beastfolk who lived in the forest broke away and returned to their lives as wolves. Those wolves are the ancestors of the forest wolves we know today, or so they say.”

“Is that story true?” I asked.

“Course not,” she replied with a shrug. “But the fact that people believe it at all is proof of just how smart the forest wolves are. The wolves that live on the plains just don’t compare. At least, that’s what I’ve heard from other travelers.”

“Interesting.”

It was amazing that these wolves were so intelligent, even though their prey was easy to capture...or was it the opposite? They didn’t have to devote much time to hunting, so they had time to advance their knowledge instead. The consequences of failure were moderate. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to afford to experiment. I found this aspect of living in a new world endlessly fascinating.

We continued to chat as we proceeded through the forest. Once we were on the main road, it was smooth sailing. We didn’t make the journey too often—just once a week—but even so, it was miraculous to me that we’d never once encountered any bandits. On top of that, I hadn’t seen any beastfolk or demihumans being treated poorly, namely Samya and Rike. This world was more developed and progressive than I’d initially imagined. It might be different within the city walls, but I had no intention of finding out.

Marius wasn't at the entrance today, but the guard on duty was one I'd previously met. He was the person Marius had dragged along to buy my longsword, so he'd probably already gotten a chance to test out the quality of my work. I told him that I was selling elite model longswords through Camilo, and he said he'd bring Marius by later to check it out.

We arrived shortly after at Camilo's shop. It was spacious and grand, much more so than I'd expected—it even had a second floor.

Rike stared up at the storefront. "What a large shop."

"Yeah, I'm surprised by the size too," I said. *Was inventory from someone like me really appropriate for a store like this?*

Inside, a variety of goods lined the walls, just like Camilo had said they would. I told someone who looked like a staff member that we were here to see Camilo and that we wanted to hand over some merchandise to him. The clerk ran off to find him, and we were left to look around.

The store carried daily necessities—dinnerware and hampers, seasonings like salt (of course), sugar, and various spices—as well as upscale items. It also sold wine, hard liquor, and ale. My weapons were displayed farther back. Two knives and two longswords were arranged on the shelves, representing both types of models: entry-level and elite.

"These blades actually look like legit goods for sale when they're lined up like this," Samya said in appreciation.

"Yeah, I know the feeling." I had to agree. "Throwing them on a counter in the Open Market just doesn't quite compare."

Personally, I had no aesthetic sense for display. However, even I could tell that this arrangement was tastefully done.

We wandered around for a while before Camilo came out to greet us. "Hello, welcome! Come with me. Let's talk upstairs."

"All right," I said, and the three of us flocked behind him.

We were led to a room near the second-floor landing. It was spacious and

furnished with a sizable table alongside several chairs, which looked provisioned specifically for business and negotiations. Camilo urged us to sit, then took the chair across from us.

Once we were all comfortable, I opened the conversation. “We brought more knives and longswords today, along with a couple of shortswords as well. How many do you want?”

“Eh? Oh, I’m happy to take everything off your hands,” Camilo said. “They’re very popular products.”

“Oh, really? That’s great,” I replied. “By the way, this store is huge! You didn’t tell me you were such a hotshot.”

“Ah well, business is what it is. We cater to everyone here, no matter if they’re a traveler, townsman, or a fellow merchant, so we have to carry a wide variety of goods. The size of the store was just a natural product of that philosophy.”

“I think I get the picture.”

Camilo’s store was like one of the department stores in my former world. They had a little something for everyone, whether the customer was a professional or your average joe. Camilo may just be at the forefront of a retail revolution here, and I wanted him to succeed. It’d be an honor for my products to help him accomplish his goals.

“Never mind that. I have something else for you,” Camilo said with an austere expression.

Maybe he hadn’t been able to find an ore supplier?

“What is it?” I asked. “It’s fine if you haven’t found more ore yet. We can come back any time, so it’s nothing to worry about.”

“Nah, that’s not it. Actually, I had a customer request—they want you to forge a custom sword, and I’ve been wondering what to do,” he confessed.

“Custom, huh?”

Given the performance of my custom blades, there is no way I could forge them for other people! But...with that mindset, I’d only ever be able to make

custom models for the people around me to use. Somehow, I needed to make them more widely available.

Upon seeing me deep in thought, Camilo said, “You’re free to refuse. I can let the customer know.”

“Well...I don’t mind making a sword for someone with the right skills.”

“Don’t worry about that. I can personally confirm whether they’re qualified, both in skill and character.”

“Hmmm...”

Though I wanted a way to verify for myself, it didn’t make sense for me to travel into town every time to vet a customer.

Oh! I got it.

“I’ll make a sword for anyone who can come visit me in my workshop, in-person and alone. How’s that?”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you the location.” Anyone who could make it through the Black Forest to my workshop (and home) unharmed by the forest wolves roaming around was sure to be skilled enough for me to entrust with one of my custom model swords.

“All right, I’ll pass the word on to the customer,” Camilo agreed.

“If you have any other requests from customers you can vouch for, feel free to give them the same condition.”

“All right.”

I turned to my companions. “Samya, Rike, sorry for deciding this one-sidedly.”

“I have no objections, Boss,” said Rike.

“Ditto for me,” Samya added.

“Thanks.” I gave Camilo the location of the workshop, and then we moved on to a new topic: the details of today’s trade. “Were you able to procure ore and charcoal?”

“Of course, of course. Quite a lot of it too,” Camilo said breezily.

As far as I knew, there weren’t any major mountain ranges around here, so he must have had the ore hauled in from far away. The charcoal was another story, but the ore must not have been cheap.

“All right,” I acknowledged. “Here’s what we’ve brought on our end.”

I lined up the items on the table, and Camilo inspected them one by one. “These here have exceptional quality,” he said, gesturing toward the elite models. “And these are your normal-quality wares, right?”

“Yeah, I make the entry-level models with quantity in mind, so the quality is...as you see it,” I said.

“Got it. Like I said before, I’ll take everything you’ve brought today. As for the ore and charcoal, I can let you check everything out for yourselves first. Follow me.”

Before we left the room, Camilo first called for a clerk. The person who showed up was not the same employee we’d spoken to downstairs. Camilo gave instructions to put a shortsword we’d brought today on display. Then, he led us downstairs using a staircase that was different from the one we’d originally taken.

These stairs led to a roomy storage space, one that probably took up a large portion of the store’s footprint. Even with its size, the room was crammed full of products and supplies. Considering the connections and financial investment that it must have taken to build up a store with such a rich array of products, Camilo could’ve had his pick of cities. He must have his own reasons for choosing a smaller town like this one. Given my own background, I thought it prudent not to pry.

“And here’s the ore and charcoal,” Camilo declared.

“You weren’t kidding... There’s quite a lot.”

It was just as Camilo had told us, but still, the amount was more than I’d imagined. If I were to use a cask of wine for comparison, he’d secured about two casks of each. Rike and I could work our hardest making entry-level models as fast as we could, and this amount of ore and charcoal would still last us two

to three weeks. Even with items that used more raw materials, like greatswords or lances, I could forge them back-to-back and the materials would easily last a week.

If Camilo could supply us with this much ore and charcoal every week, our workshop would not have a shadow of a problem operating. Furthermore, if we were only going to maintain the same quality and quantity of goods that we were producing right now, it would take even longer to use up the materials; he could decrease the supply with no issues on our end.

Just as I was thinking that, Camilo said, “I can’t promise you the same amount every single week, but it’ll be roughly the same.”

“Not a problem. We’d be fine with quite a bit less, actually. We won’t be able to go through all of this ore and charcoal in one week, but we can store the extra. Don’t worry.”

“Good, good. Then, let’s talk about the price,” he said.

He laid out the details for us. According to him, the raw materials cost a fourth of what the items we’d brought today were worth. Looking at it another way, we only had to produce a quarter of the goods we’d brought today in order to ensure a healthy supply of iron every week.

“Isn’t this rather cheap for the raw materials? Will you be able to turn any profits?” I asked.

“Of course. I’ll still make off quite well,” Camilo replied.

“All right. Fine with me then.”

“Are these prices okay with you for your products?”

“Yeah,” I confirmed. “We can discuss it again if anything major happens.”

“Sounds good.”

The two of us shook hands to close the deal, and with that, our negotiations were complete.

Now that the shoptalk was over, I turned my thoughts to practical matters. “Hmmm, these raw materials are going to be difficult for us to carry back.”

“True,” he said.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a cart?”

I’d asked without expecting much, but miraculously, Camilo had a solution. “Normally, no, but we do actually have a cart that we’re not using right now. It’s still in working condition though. With a little upkeep, it’ll run for quite a while yet. I was going to chop it up for firewood, but I remembered that you folks always come without a cart, so I left it as is in case you might want it.”

“That would work perfectly for us to haul all of this home,” I said.

“Then it’s yours.”

“How much?” I asked.

“It’s free.”

“Free? Seriously?”

“We’re not using it, so just think of it as a favor for a valued client.”

With some hesitancy, I responded, “Is that so...”

Camilo didn’t seem to be lying. There was also no reason for him to go out of his way to trick a blacksmith that lived out in the middle of nowhere, so I didn’t think he had any ulterior motives. But...

I had to be sure.

“Why are you going so far for us?” I didn’t ask to catch him in a lie—the question was too simple for that—but rather, just to see if he had a reason that I could easily accept.

“It’s just as I said. I like to think our partnership will continue into the future, and the goods you supply me are high-quality,” Camilo explained. “Clients like you are one in a million, so I’m just showing my gratitude.”

I see. So, it wasn’t just out of the goodness of his heart after all. I decided to take him at face value for now. “All right. Thanks, Camilo. I’ll take it off your hands then.”

“Yeah, all yours.”

“Oh, can I also buy some salt and wine from you? You can take the cost out of

my profits,” I said.

“Sure. I’ll have your cart prepared with the goods while I calculate the final total, so how about you kill some time and come back in about half an hour?”

“Okay, I’ll leave it to you then.”

“No problem.”

And so, we temporarily parted ways with Camilo. As we left his shop to wander around, I griped to Samya and Rike. “He said to kill time, but I have no idea where to go. I’ve only been to the Open Market.”

“Oh, really?” Rike said, surprised.

“I’m the one who goes out to buy salt, pork, and other necessities,” Samya explained before I could get a word in. “Eizo was always in charge of the shop.”

“The only store I’ve been to, if you can call it that, is the tavern that you led us to... The one where we chatted for the first time, Rike.”

“Well, it’s settled then! Let’s explore today and see what kinds of shops the new market district has to offer.” At Rike’s suggestion, we headed into the bustling and rowdy crowd.

The district consisted of a variety of different sections; there were places with impressive storefronts lined up neatly side by side, and also spots with mostly carts and stalls. There were no sections as rough and chaotic as the Open Market though.

Naturally, there was also a plethora of goods for sale. Most stores specialized in one type of product, but there were a few exceptions to the rule. I suspected that one of the reasons why the shops here did so well was actually because of how much traffic passed through the Open Market.

I was curious about why there were so many stores here, so I asked my question out loud, and Rike answered. “This city is the midway point for travelers circumnavigating around the Black Forest. Folks from the south, for example, pass through this city regardless of whether their final destination is in the north or the west. You’ve always come directly from the Black Forest, Boss, so you probably didn’t realize.”

That's true. For normal people, a trip through the forest was too risky, so they had no choice but to take a detour around it. The midway point along that route was a strategic position for a city, from both military and cultural perspectives. That much was the same as back on Earth.

The reasoning was clear to me, but Samya looked completely lost at Rike's explanation. It seemed like she couldn't relate at all since she'd been living in different areas of the forest for her entire life. Well, as Rike pointed out, I was partially in the same boat as Samya.

We ambled around, stopping by stores here and there. Once enough time had passed, we headed back to Camilo's shop and were met with a cart loaded with iron ore, charcoal, bags of salt, and casks of wine.

Despite the cargo, the cart still had room for more. It wasn't just a simple platform with wheels either, like the ones used in Japan during the Edo period. Rather, it looked more like the back of a pickup truck, where the front and sides were enclosed with a low fence. The back was fenceless because that was where luggage was loaded and unloaded. The most accurate comparison I could think of was a horse-drawn cart, sans the horse.

Camilo came out to receive us in person this time. "Hey, you're back." He walked over to me and held out an envelope. "Here's the money I owe you for today."

I checked just in case, but it looked like the right amount. "Got it. We'll see you next week."

"I'll be waiting!"

We set off on the road home with our newly secured mode of transport. That said, the cart was primarily for transporting luggage, so Rike and I had to pull it along. Samya was exempt since she was our guard. Though she could've ridden with the cargo, she chose to walk alongside us instead. The cart was heavy, weighed down with everything we were bringing back, but the wheels were a major help. We were still able to move along at a quick pace.

I was worried about the wheels getting stuck in the forest. However, the dirt was hard-packed rather than loamy, as we'd experienced firsthand when

digging the support beam holes for the new rooms.

I'd hoped we would make it through without too much fuss. And if worse came to worst, Samya could help push the cart from behind.

But I did have one more concern on my mind: safety. We were obviously towing goods along, so we'd be a tempting target for bandits, much more so than we had been as just three travelers on foot. I didn't think there were likely to be any around, especially since Samya had never detected any. However, it didn't change the fact that, if we did run into anyone, we were now juicer prey.

Of course, we wouldn't go down easy. Samya was armored and armed with a custom model bow, and she was one of the beastfolk, a tiger-type no less. I was also here to help if we were in danger. Still, it'd be better if no one attacked us at all.

I discussed my worries with Samya, asking her to be extra vigilant on our way home. In the end, though, we reached the forest without anything happening. Still, from now on, we should plan to be on our guard while heading home. I was suddenly reminded of a line from a children's song I'd heard back in Japan that went something like: "The going is easy, but returning is rough."

Once we were in the forest, the wheels rolled smoothly along the dirt without sinking, just as I'd hoped. I'd also been worried about whether the cart was narrow enough to fit between the trees, but the ones in the Black Forest were sparse enough for the cart to pass through. The cart itself wasn't very wide anyway.

Of course, it took more effort to pull the cart along in the dirt rather than on the well-maintained city road. "Wouldn't it be nice to fix up a small road through the forest?" I mused.

But then Rike reminded me, "If we built a road, the test we proposed to Camilo would become useless. It'd be a piece of cake for customers to come to the workshop, Boss."

"You're right."

We'd just discussed this with Camilo—I would make custom weapons only for those who were truly skilled enough to wield them. If we cleared a path, the

challenge would simply become a test of following the road. And with that, it would lose all merit and become nothing more dangerous than a routine trip to buy tofu. No good.

The three of us made it home safely without running into any major problems. It'd be a blessing if all our trips were as uneventful as this one, but sooner or later, trouble was bound to find us. Hopefully, we'd be able to resolve it with minimum effort when the time came...

We unloaded the cart and brought everything inside the cabin. The salt and wine weren't hard to move, but it was quite time-consuming to carry in all the ore and charcoal, even with three of us. All in all, it was a full day of work. Perhaps I could think of a way to bring in goods with a wheelbarrow.

To close out the day, we had an extravagant dinner consisting of wheat porridge paired with jerky and root vegetables stewed in the wine we'd bought (and a little water). The meat didn't taste gamey at all and was quite tasty. Both Samya and Rike also gave it good reviews, so I'd be sure to add this dish to my repertoire going forward.

###

The next day, we went back to our routines of constructing the new rooms and blacksmithing. For the latter, I'd be shifting my focus to elite models from now on, and Rike would be working on the entry-level models. I also had to think about developing new weapons for the future.

For the time being, we'd be adding shortswords to our regular lineup. They were forged the same way as longswords; the only difference between the two was the length of the blade. The decreased length of the shortsword made it a versatile weapon that was easy to wield, which was exactly why I chose to make them. Forge Eizo's lineup now consisted of three types of bladed weapons, each with a different length: knives, shortswords, and longswords. Each product had an entry-level model and elite model as well.

Rike and I headed to the workshop to begin our smithing work for the day. Samya, on the other hand, left the house, declaring that she'd catch a couple of birds or rabbits. I surmised that she didn't want to hunt deer today because she'd rather be free to help us tomorrow. Besides, we already had plenty of

meat in storage.

First, Rike and I had to smelt the ore to produce the plates of metal that would be used for the weapons. Before we started, we compared the quality of the ore we received yesterday with the pieces that we already had in stock from when I first arrived in this world. I inspected each type carefully, taking my installed data into consideration. The original stock's quality was slightly better, but there wasn't much of a difference to see.

"They look about the same to me. What do you think, Rike?" I handed her the two pieces I'd been comparing.

"Let's see..." After a moment of scrutiny, she said, "It's like you said, Boss, the quality is nearly identical. Whoever assessed the new ore we received must have pretty good eyes."

"All right, let's use the new materials then," I said.

"Understood, Boss."

I lit a fire in the magical bloomery using my own magic and then added charcoal along with the ore, which had been broken into small pieces already. I alternated between fanning the flames with wind magic and letting the fire and metal rest. After repeating the two steps several times, I had a batch of iron—or steel, to be more precise—ready for use.

If this had been a non-magical furnace, like the ones used in ancient Japan, there would've been many more steps: after the ore had been heated through alternate uses of the bellows, the body of the forge would've been broken to extract the pure *tamahagane* steel—the metal amalgamation of iron and steel with varying quality—from the bloom.

However, this magical furnace didn't produce any slag, which was, to put it bluntly, the garbage produced during the smelting process. With this furnace, only the usable steel remained, thus eliminating the need to break the furnace vessel.

The final step in our smelting process was to pour the steel out of the furnace. Ours was on the large side, so it produced a fair amount of steel when filled up all the way.

To think that the cheats I was granted extended this far, unbelievable! I felt a bit apologetic to the other inhabitants of this world, but I couldn't just let these gifts go to waste.

"Looking good. Shall we continue?"

"Yes, Boss."

After removing the steel, we took a sizable portion of the cooled metal and reheated it in the forge. When it was thoroughly hot, we removed it from the heat again, and together, Rike and I hammered it into a flat plate. The shaping took both time and effort. Once the first plate was complete, we stepped back to evaluate our work.

"It's not bad, I gotta say."

"Yes, I agree. In fact, it's better made than the plate metal we currently have in storage," Rike said.

"I trust your judgment wholeheartedly. Let's keep going."

"Okay!"

We spent the rest of the day smelting ore into plate metal. Just as we were finishing up around dusk, Samya returned from her hunt.

"I'm home!" she called out to us.

"Welcome home!" I replied. "Rike, this is a good place to stop. Let's call it quits for the day."

"I understand, Boss."

We cleaned up the workshop quickly and returned to the living area where Samya was waiting.

"What did you end up catching today?" I asked.

"Rabbits." As she'd explained to me previously, these rabbits had ears that looked like blades of grass. She'd managed to take down three. They weren't very big, so they didn't take much time to skin and dress. They also didn't have much meat on their bones, but it was just enough for the three of us.

Like yesterday, we enjoyed another luxurious feast. I served the rabbit as a

steak paired with wine sauce, and alongside the meat, we ate flatbread and a root vegetable and cured venison soup (left over from Rike's and my lunch).

I stuffed a bite of rabbit into my mouth and was wondrously impressed. "It's delicious!"

"I know," Samya said. "They're difficult to catch, but luck was on my side today."

"It's quite flavorful," Rike complimented.

The day came to a close, scored by the soundtrack of lip-smacking rabbit goodness.

While we all enjoyed our food, I had another suggestion to share with everyone. "We've saved up a good amount of money, so I propose that we put a pause on blacksmithing next week and focus on the cabin instead. We still have to make the doors and beds."

"That's true," Rike agreed. "We've made plenty of blades as well, so we should be able to afford a week."

"Cool, I'll help out too! We're not short on meat either, right?"

It looked like both Rike and Samya were on board.

"It's decided then. Also, next time we're in town, we can ask Camilo to help us find bedding."

We headed off to sleep, giddy about our upcoming one-week vacation of sorts.

Chapter 3: The Delights of Vacation

The next day, we prepared for another journey into the city and loaded our goods onto the cart that Camilo had given us. We brought along the usual weapons, but with a bonus: half of the sickles that I had in inventory. All in all, the goods weren't too heavy, so we were able to move at our usual walking pace.

The trip was uneventful. Aside from a couple of rather adorable bunnies, we didn't encounter anything in the forest or on the main road. After arriving at the city, we headed straight for Camilo's shop and asked the clerks to call him for us.

Camilo stepped out to greet us with his usual, relaxed air. "Hey."

"Hey," I replied back. "How's business going?"

"Slowly, but surely. We have no problems with moving stock along nor with supply shortages."

"Then slowly but surely it is," I agreed.

"Right?"

"Mmhmm."

We shared a chuckle before I moved on to the inventory report for the day.

"We left the cart next to the storehouse," I said. "We've got the usual items today, but we also brought a few sickles. I've tried to sell those before, but with no luck, so do you want them? Feel free to say no."

"The more inventory the better. I'll take them off your hands and add their price in with the total," he said. He called out a short "come here!" to a nearby worker and had them take the wares into the shop.

Once he was finished addressing his employee, I continued. "Another thing... We won't be able to come by next week. Will that be a problem for you?"

"No, no problem, but...did anything happen?" He spoke tentatively, and his

expression seemed anxious. He was probably recalling my “special circumstances”—maybe an untimely blunder I’d committed, or something of the sort—that had led me to live in a place like the Black Forest. I’m sure he was worried that something could happen to me at any moment and he wouldn’t know about it, something that might prevent me from coming back here in the future.

“Nothing in particular,” I assured him. “We’re gonna focus on home improvements next week, so we’ll be taking a short break from blacksmithing.”

“Got it. Then, the next time we meet will be two weeks from now?”

“Yup. Oh, if possible, can you procure us two sets of bedding by that time?”

He easily agreed. “Two sets? Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

With the shop talk concluded, we bought some salt, wine, and vegetables; he subtracted the cost from our profits.

As we started back home, I mused over the present and future. This exchange with Camilo was becoming part of my new normal. It wasn’t as if we’d agreed to this script beforehand, but somehow, it’d become a comfortable routine. I hoped it would continue for a long time.

When we left the market and its surrounding fence, I glanced at the guards posted there, but Marius wasn’t on duty. We hadn’t seen him that morning either. I decided that if we didn’t catch him on the next trip, I’d ask around.

It’d been a while since he’d bought the knife and longsword from my Open Market stall. I assumed that, if he was having any problems with the blades, he’d probably bring them into Camilo’s shop. But, if possible, I’d rather ask him face-to-face.

We soon left the city behind us and before I knew it, we had arrived home. After bringing in the supplies and storing them in their respective places, our work for the day was complete.

Over dinner, we discussed our construction plans for the next week.

“Tomorrow, let’s start with the doors,” I suggested. “I’ll handle the hinges. Can you two make the main body?”

“Understood,” Rike said.

Samya agreed as well with a simple “All right.”

So the plan was for us to finish off the doors and then move on to the beds. After we’d built both, the rooms would be ready for use, and all three of us would finally have our own bedrooms! The details were all worked out when I suddenly remembered something crucial.

“Oh no!” I couldn’t help my startled exclamation.

Surprised by my outburst, Samya asked, “Wh-What’s wrong, Eizo?” Next to her, Rike looked equally stunned.

“No, don’t worry, it’s just that...I wanted to build a guest room as well, but I completely forgot about it.” I literally hadn’t remembered until a second ago. The cabin as it was had no extra space for guests.

I was just starting to sink back into my thoughts when Rike offered her own suggestion: “What if we renovate the study? Boss’s bedroom... Well, Samya and I are using it right now, but your bedroom is spacious and roomy. If you swap out the current desk and chair for the ones in the study, and then add a bookshelf, I think your bedroom could double as a workspace. And with that furniture removed, the study would have enough free space to add a bed.”

“I see what you’re saying.” It seemed like that would work. We wouldn’t have enough bedding for a third bed, but it’s not as though we were expecting visitors anytime soon. I could always strip my own bedding and offer it to guests in an emergency.

After a moment of consideration, I was on board. “All right, let’s go with that plan. But we’ll have to add one more bed to the roster of things to make.”

“We can make our beds first as practice and save the guest bed for last. By then, we’ll all be old hands at it,” Rike said.

“Sounds like a plan.”

And so, our itinerary for the next few days was set. We wouldn’t be earning any money for the work, but it was important to set aside time for ourselves as well!

I began the next morning in the workshop with one goal: make the door hinges.

For starters, I heated up some of the plate metal that Rike and I had made. I struck the metal with my hammer to flatten it into a thinner piece with a larger surface area. Next, I cut the sheet metal into small sections. For each piece, I trimmed off a little square from two of the corners, and then another square on the edge in between the two corners. The resulting shape looked like a rectangle with two tabs sticking out of it.

I curled the two tabs into hollow cylinders and waited for the pieces to cool. Then, I slid two of the pieces together, so that their cylindrical tabs interlocked like puzzle pieces. I ran a pin through all of the lined-up cylinders, which created a solid pivot point for each hinge. I'd already heated the pin enough to be slightly malleable, so all I had to do was hammer the ends of the pin to create a flat end cap on each side. This permanently connected the two pieces and made sure that all the metal stayed together.

With that, the hinge was complete.

I stayed busy while waiting for the finished product to cool. I hadn't run into any hiccups in the process yet, so I decided that it wouldn't be a bad idea to make hinges in bulk. The extras would come in handy if the originals broke, or when we had to build more rooms. Before long, I had myself a sizable pile of door hinges.

When I left the workshop to check on Rike and Samya, I found them still grappling with the door. However, they'd made good progress and were more than halfway done.

"I finished the hinges and I've come to help!" I declared.

"Boss! Welcome," Rike said.

I told the two of them to continue working on the door they'd already started, and I began working on a new door.

To start, I took four of the planks we'd cut, and laid them out into a rectangle, which formed the outer door frame. For the door itself, I put together

horizontal planks that matched the size of the door frame, braced it with diagonal beams, and then affixed a handle at the center. The handle was only meant for pulling the door open since I didn't include a lock. I did, however, add a simple latch for security.

While I worked, Samya and Rike finished making their door. "You can grab some hinges from the workshop," I told them. "Go ahead and install the door onto the threshold."

"Got it," Samya said with a bright smile. She had really taken to the smithing and woodwork recently. Someday, she might even be able to work alone, and would become a major asset as both a blacksmith and a carpenter.

Samya only needed to take down one large animal during her hunts for us to have enough to eat; we always ended up with plenty of leftovers in storage too. From now on, I could have her help out more often with smithing. It'd be handy if she could aid Rike when I was occupied, or if, for some reason, I couldn't stick to my normal smithing routine.

That door took me the rest of the day to make. Once I finished, I went over to the newly expanded side of the house so that I could attach it. Rike and Samya were done with their work and were now playing around with the door, opening and closing it repeatedly.

"How's it feel?" I asked.

"Good! It works perfectly," Rike responded. "It opens and shuts with barely a touch."

"Well, the hinges *were* made by none other than yours truly!" I boasted.

"You say that like it's a joke, but I seriously think that's the reason," Rike commented without a hint of sarcasm.

We chatted away as I attached my door to the opening. Come to think of it, I'd have to make more nails to replenish our supply soon.

By the end of the day, we had both doors attached, and the house's skeleton was finally complete!

###

The next day, we moved on to building the beds, in accordance with our plan. If we'd been making polished goods that were meant to be sold as products, it would've been impossible to finish everything in the six days we had left. However, we were only making beds for our own use, so they didn't need to be anything fancy. I was briefly conflicted about what to do for the guest bed, but in the end, I decided it would be all right if the bed was on the crude side; I didn't anticipate any long-term visitors anyway.

It wasn't out of the realm of possibility for a noble from the capital to pay us a visit—of course, any aristocrat would look down their noses at the kind of simple bed I was imagining. After all, nobles had to have standards to maintain their honor. But this workshop was just a humble forge, so what could they really expect? Besides, the condition I gave for anyone wanting a custom model was that they had to visit the forge in-person and come *alone*. Anyone capable of that could probably withstand a little rough treatment. In any case, no one was going to be coming out here right off the bat.

Now then, time to kick-start work for the day.

"All right! Today, we're making the beds. I'll leave you two to cut the boards to size. Let me know when you're done, and I'll carve out the slots for the joints."

Rike responded with her traditional "I understand."

"Mmkay," Samya replied.

We were going to be working in the same groups as yesterday. Rike and Samya would make one bed; I'd make the other. We all decided to work outside since the skies were clear and the sunlight was pleasantly warm. It helped that there was no shortage of space around the cabin.

There was no way we'd be able to finish everything today. But, I'd be content if we finished cutting all the wood to the right size—we'd then be set up to assemble the beds the following day. Hopefully, by the end of tomorrow, we'd have the beds built and installed in their rightful places in the new bedrooms. The plan after that was to work on the guest bed, and we'd round out the week by remodeling my bedroom and the study. That was our full six-day itinerary!

Back to the present. To begin, we had to cut the boards to size. Luckily, we

still had plenty of dried lumber; the carrying platforms that we'd built to haul back Samya's deer had been made from fresh trees, so we'd harvested and dried that wood into lumber.

Since we didn't have any rulers, we cut a few pieces of lumber to roughly the length and width of a bed and then used those as our base measurements. That was also how we estimated what the height of the bed should be. After we'd figured out the sizes, the process became much faster, and we were soon churning out wooden boards one after another. The time passed quickly as we entered a kind of woodworking trance.

"Boss, this piece is ready for you to carve."

"No problem."

This kind of simple exchange happened sporadically too. I cut out holes for the interlocking joints, so they would be ready to slot into place when we assembled all the parts. By the end of the day, we were able to finish all the individual pieces.

Day two: assembly time.

When I stopped to think about it, I realized something—back in my old world, even building furniture from preassembled parts sold by furniture stores took a lot of time and effort. With that experience in mind, I set my expectations for the day accordingly. It wasn't so difficult to work with a hammer, but building the bed accurately was harder than I'd anticipated.

We managed to put the pieces together, one by one by one, and at last, we had two beds ready to use!

When we moved them into the two rooms, Rike said, "All we did was add a bed, but the room already feels much more homey, like a place where someone actually lives."

"Yeaah," Samya agreed. "I'd never slept on a bed before coming here, but I've gotten used to it. The bed definitely makes it feel like, you know, a room."

"Dwarves have rooms, but we're more used to sleeping all together. We actually feel a little restless when we're in separate rooms," Rike admitted.

“Wait. Didn’t you say you’ve helped build rooms before, Rike?” I asked.

“I have, but each room typically houses an entire family. We don’t put in any beds, only shelves and common-use furniture. Of course, dwarves of different genders who aren’t family don’t sleep in the same room.”

“I see.”

One person, one bed. That seemed like common sense to me, but I might need to reevaluate my thinking in this world. It looked like I was actually the odd man out here. I wondered how the people in the city—both inside and outside the walls—usually lived. “Well, in any case, our house is really coming together.”

“Yup,” Samya said.

Rike agreed. “Yes.”

Since it was a monumental day for us all, I brought out some wine with dinner.

“Cheers!”

“Cheers! Whoo!”

“Cheers!”

We all toasted with our wooden cups. They collided together in the middle of the table with a satisfying *clunk*. Serving wine with dinner made it feel a little more like a true celebration. It was small moments like this that were truly precious in life.

“Samya, you and your family never lived together?” I asked.

“Only when I was a kid,” she answered in between taking large swigs from her cup. “I lived with my mom and siblings until I was one year old. There was a lot to learn back then. After that, I became independent and moved out. Even when we lived together, we all shared one room though, so it wasn’t like this cabin where we each had our own space.”

Rike downed her drink heartily. “Dwarves are the same way,” she said after listening to Samya’s story. “The whole family—both men and women—live in the same room, spending our time together and learning blacksmithing

techniques. Once we reach a certain age, we leave our home workshop to travel and search for an apprenticeship. We learn what we can and then go back home.”

“Your lifestyles really *are* similar,” I remarked, “at least up to the point where you return home after the apprenticeship.”

“Right, like I said before, the goal is to bring new techniques back to our family’s workshop,” Rike replied. She’d finished her first cup and was now pouring herself a second but was hardly even flushed. “Sometimes though, apprenticeships don’t lead to any new techniques, only improvements of our existing skills. There are even times when the dwarf chooses to stay with their apprentice workshop instead of going home.”

“They don’t return?” I asked in surprise. *Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of traveling in the first place?*

Rike nodded and said, “Yes. It’s not unheard of for a male dwarf to...become friendly with the daughter of the workshop, and likewise with a female dwarf and a workshop lad or boss. It’s pretty common when the apprenticeship is with a workshop run by another dwarf, but it happens with human-run workshops too. After all, the genders between both races work the same.”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.” *Well, you can’t stop two youngsters in love.*

“In my case, there’s clearly a lot for me to learn from you, Boss, so I’ve resolved to bring everything back to my family workshop!”

I took a small sip of my own wine. “I see. That’s good.”

###

“Today, we’re making the bed for the guest room, so we’ll be going with a slightly more elaborate design,” I declared the next morning.

“What kind of design?” Rike asked.

“How do I describe it...” I mumbled.

The other two beds were for our personal use, so we’d stuck with a simple frame. For the guest bed, I wanted us to install a headboard with shelving basically. I’d considered adding decorative carvings, but ultimately decided

against it—I was afraid it would end up looking gaudy.

I explained everything to Samya and Rike, and they accepted it easily with their usual affirmations.

“Got it.”

“I understand.”

To start, we had to cut the planks for the headboard and shelves today, along with the rest of the frame. Then, we could get started on assembly. We only had to make one bed, so if we worked quickly, we could start putting the bed together today...or so I hoped.

We ended up finishing at an awkward, in-between time because of the extra wood needed for the headboard. There was some time left in the day, but not enough that it made sense to continue working.

“All right, let’s stop here for today. We can finish the rest tomorrow,” I announced to everyone.

“Kay.”

“All right.”

With the remaining hours in the day, I made nails in the workshop. They ended up being closer to Japanese-style nails with square stalks, rather than the cylindrical Western ones. I amassed a good amount before the day was over.

Japanese nails were very durable. Maybe one day this cabin would become a rare cultural property of sorts...maybe.

Now wouldn’t that be interesting?

###

Early the next morning, we began work again. Before putting the guest bed together, we first reorganized the rooms. We took everything out of the master bedroom that Rike and Samya had been using, except for the bed and shelves, and moved the furniture into the living room. We grabbed the desk, chair, and one bookshelf from the study and arranged them in the master bedroom. Finally, we moved the old bedroom furniture into the study’s newly cleared space. The work took up a large chunk of time, and I kind of regretted not doing

it yesterday, but there was no use crying about that now.

Because of the lost time, we scrambled to put the bed together. There were a few bumps along the way, but since we'd already assembled two beds, we had the process more or less worked out. Even so, by the time we'd finished, the sun had almost completely set, and so we hurried to move the bed inside.

"Careful over here," I pointed out sporadically, as Samya and I carried the guest bed into the study. Well, I'd be the one using it for now anyway.

"Mmkay."

It was completely dark by the time we'd moved the bed into its proper place.

"I can't believe how long that took," I commented, reflecting on the day's work.

"It is what it is. We're not used to building furniture, after all," Samya said in a comforting tone.

"From now on, we probably won't have the chance to do this kind of work very often, so it's all right to put more time into it." Rike's words were also kind.

It'd been a wild ride, but overall, we'd accomplished what we'd set out to do. From out of the uncertainty, confusion, and building mayhem came a full set of beds. The cabin was starting to feel more and more like home. Now, all that was left was to procure bedding from Camilo the next time we went to town, and we'd be able to make up the beds!

As for other furniture, neither Samya nor Rike really used any. Their belongings had been scattered all over the rooms. Though they did store their clothing, it was only in makeshift bundles. Their habits did make sense, considering that Samya used to change her home den all the time and Rike had shared her room with her family. In Rike's case, apparently only the shared possessions were stored away in cabinets.

Regardless, I still had a strong sense of propriety according to customs of my last world, which was why I had insisted on separate rooms for the two women in the first place. *I'll have to look for more excuses to build furniture. At the very least, a wardrobe is a must-have...*

The next morning marked the sixth day since the start of our house renovation vacation. I'd actually planned for this day to be a buffer, just in case anything went wrong and we ended up needing extra time. However, everything had progressed smoothly according to plan, so there was nothing left for us to build. Tomorrow was a free day too. If this were a normal week, we'd be heading into the city tomorrow, but we were skipping the trip this time.

I'd considered rushing some blacksmithing today, perhaps making some last-minute swords to sell tomorrow, but we'd already told Camilo that we wouldn't be coming. Besides, I hadn't been able to take a proper vacation for a looong time. Now that I'd been given the perfect environment to enjoy a slow and quiet life, I should make the most of it and take breaks whenever I can.

I made up my mind: we'd take the next two days off!

Making that decision was good and all, but the forest wasn't exactly filled with recreational activities. Our options were quite limited. There were plenty of games and entertainment unique to this world—we'd even seen some being sold at Camilo's shop. However, they were surprisingly expensive, so we hadn't bought any. On the flip side, I could introduce Samya and Rike to games from my previous world, like Othello or shogi, but I'd save that as a last resort. After all, I had come all the way to a new world, so I wanted to enjoy what was around me.

So...the time had finally come for me to do something I had been itching to do since I'd gotten here. I made my preparations and invited Samya and Rike along with me as well. A little less than an hour later, the three of us arrived at a clear river near the lake.

That's right. We were here to fish!

This stream was the source of the welling waters I'd seen the first time I'd gone to the lake. It was a considerable distance from our cabin, and the river snaked away from the house, so we never had a reason to come this way.

But today and tomorrow were different. We were on vacation, and a relaxing day at the lake didn't sound half bad. *Not bad at all.* If all went well, we might

even be able to catch ourselves dinner...but, of course, now that I'd said that, we were sure to get skunked.

Aanywho, I'd crafted all the fishing tools we were using for the day myself. I repurposed a few of the nails I'd made previously and shaped them into fishing hooks, then strung them up with the thinnest thread we had at the cabin. For the rod, I found some promising-looking branches (or tree deer antlers perhaps) in the forest and used my knife to whittle them down. The bait was long insects that looked like grubs, which I'd found underneath the rocks around the river.

I baited a fish hook and showed the impaled grub to Samya and Rike, but neither of them screamed or made a fuss. In fact, they barely reacted at all.

Samya, I could understand. She'd always lived in the forest, so she must've seen bugs and larvae all the time. However, if I'm being honest, Rike's indifference was a bit of a letdown.

When I asked her about it, she said, "There are plenty of insects up in the mountains too. I used to play with them when I was little."

Okay, whatever...

We put some space between the three of us and each cast out our lines. The water was almost perfectly clear, so we could see some fish swimming around. On the other hand, that meant that the fish could also see our shadows, so we might not be getting bites anytime soon.

There weren't any fishing methods that were off-limits here. We could've stunned the fish using sound waves by hitting underwater boulders with another rock or hammer, a practice largely forbidden in Japan. It certainly would've made catching the fish easier, but the stakes weren't that high; it wasn't as if we needed to nab any targets.

The point today was just to have fun—I told myself this so as not to jinx anything. In truth, I didn't want to go home empty-handed.

Around noon, we chowed down on sandwiches—or tacos, depending on how you looked at them—made from flatbread and cured meat that had been stewed. The closest comparison was probably gua bao, the Taiwanese pork belly buns that were sold in Chinatown. Anyway, setting aside what they looked

like, they were more delicious than I could've imagined. I found myself rather enjoying the little picnic we had set up for ourselves.

Up until now, we'd had zero bites. Well...that's what I'd have liked to report, but actually, Samya had already caught one fish, and Rike two. All the fish were the same species, and they looked like the char back on Earth. They were now swimming in a small water basin we'd brought along with us. The only one who hadn't caught anything yet was me...

"You gotta hide your bloodlust better, Eizo," Samya told me.

I would make sure to do just that in the afternoon.

For a while past noon, none of us saw any action. It was probably past the feeding window for the fish, so we took a break from casting our lines to go pick some blueberry-like fruits that were growing nearby. We didn't eat any though until Samya looked over them and gave us the all-clear.

"There are fruits that look nearly identical to these, but are actually poisonous. If you two are ever out by yourselves, don't pick and eat anything on the spot," Samya warned us.

Out of curiosity, I asked, "What would happen if we ate it?"

"The poison would take about two hours to circulate through your body. In the worst-case scenario, you'd die. Even if you were lucky and survived, you'd be paralyzed by the poison for a whole day and night. I'm sure you can guess what would happen if you ended up paralyzed for so long in the middle of the forest after wandering around for two hours."

"All right then. I'll be careful," I said.

"Please do."

The fact that there were people who died in a state of paralysis likely meant that the respiratory organs were paralyzed too. Even my cheats wouldn't be able to save me from a death like that. Better watch out.

After killing some time, we returned to the river and cast our lines again.

Rike had already caught two fish, and Samya one, so on average, we had

caught one fish per person.

On average...

My dignity as the head of the family and the boss of the workshop was on the (literal) line here! At least let me catch one fish—just one!—before we head home.

Just as I was thinking that, Samya suddenly burst out laughing. “I can’t believe you want to catch a fish that badly!”



Oh right...I'd completely forgotten that Samya could read strong emotions.

Breathe. You gotta breathe. Just relax, Eizo. Act natural.

As I tried to suppress my emotions, Rike chuckled lightly and said, "Even I can tell you how much you want it, Boss."

"S-Surely I wasn't that transparent."

"Yup, no doubt about it," Samya stated, nodding deeply.

And Rike confirmed it, with the same meaningful nod. "Yes, you were."

Dejected by our exchange, I cast in my line again.

But...there were no more bites for some time following our exchange. Just as we were about ready to start heading home, my rod snapped forward with tension.

"Yes!"

A bite!

Calmly and with composure, I set the hook. The tugging I felt at the other end of the line was strong and persistent, but I think I'd managed to snag it. I stood the rod up vertically and started to reel in the line, all while the fish was still swimming in the opposite direction to get away.

I had to take it slow. If I was careless, it would escape, and I couldn't afford to let that happen. I hauled the fish toward me, careful to not allow any slack in the line. Once I had pulled it in close, I gave the line one last firm jerk and lifted the fish clear of the water.

Phew! I managed to save face today.

"Finally! I caught one!" Never mind that it was a tad small compared to the fish that Samya and Rike had caught. A fish was a fish.

Samya was looking at me, lightly exasperated, but I paid her no mind as we finally set off back home.

That night we lit a bonfire and grilled our haul of the day over the flames. Of course, the meal turned out absolutely scrumptious. I savored the taste of the first fish I'd had in ages, along with the warm, camp-like atmosphere. One day, I

hoped this kind of leisure would become another part of my new normal, but I suspected that day was still a ways off in the distance.

And so, we ended the first day of our vacation in utter satisfaction.

###

Yesterday we'd enjoyed fishing to the fullest. Somehow, I'd snagged a fish and had just barely managed to protect my reputation.

Today was the second day of our vacation, and it wouldn't be fun if we did the same thing two days in a row. That and...well, if I didn't catch anything today, I wouldn't have another chance to avenge myself. I wanted to avoid that possibility at all costs.

But working on a precious day off was the *modus operandi* of a workaholic. There was one thing I could think of that wasn't work-related, although it didn't really count as leisure either.

"We're going to start a vegetable patch today!" I announced to Samya and Rike. I'd already reverted the bastardized hoe into its original form. I brought it with me to the clearing outside the hallway of the new rooms. It was technically a courtyard space, so to speak, if we were to continue expanding our house.

"All right," Rike responded, sickle in hand.

"Sure, works for me," Samya agreed. She was also holding a sickle. "But, why?"

"Right now, we have to go and buy all of our vegetables, but I want us to be self-sufficient. Your hunts supply us with meat, and fruit we can harvest around the lake—but there's no place to find vegetables."

Actually, there may be wild vegetables growing in the area, but I figured that the vegetables people ate in this world were probably different from wild ones. I'd seen carrot facsimiles in this world, and they didn't look wild; they looked like the carrots I'd eaten regularly in my previous world. So, we might as well try and grow some for ourselves. If only I could get my hands on some potatoes... I'd like a place to cultivate those as well.

Unlike in my previous world, potatoes had been propagated all over this

world. However, rather than relying on just potatoes as their main crop, farmers cultivated wheat and other produce as well. That said, potatoes weren't often sold in the markets here, whether because they were rare in this area to begin with, or because of overconsumption. Possibly, there was a law restricting cultivation to only the amount needed for one's personal needs.

I explained all of this to Rike and Samya.

"I've thought this before because of our conversations over dinner, but you have an enormous breadth of knowledge, Boss," Rike said appreciatively.

"Yeah, Eizo's oddly well-informed," Samya replied.

And just what exactly do you mean by "oddly?"

Although...I couldn't really deny it. Between everything I knew from my previous world and the installed knowledge, "oddly" was probably an apt descriptor. I could tell that I was wearing a peculiar expression.

Anyway, time to get started...

The field was going to be for our own personal use, so digging it up didn't violate the "no working today" rule I'd set for everyone. In my previous world, people used to rent plots and tend to them for fun. What we were doing was no different.

At first, all we did was cut the grass in the courtyard with the sickles. The tools were entry-level models, but they cut well enough. It was noon by the time we'd cleared a big enough patch, so we took a short break from work.

I think this size will do for our purposes.

"After we finish eating, shall we make hoes for both of you as well?" I suggested.

"You sure?" Samya asked.

"They won't be anything grand, just something to get us through the work today."

"That sounds like plenty to me," Rike said.

Whoops, apparently we're doing blacksmithing today after all. But it's for the

house, so let's just agree that it doesn't count, all right?

After we finished lunch, we moved to the workshop. I had Samya and Rike heat up some metal plates and shape them. I'd be in charge of the finishing touches. After the fire was lit in the fire bed, Rike heated up the metal until it was red hot, then removed the plates and placed them on the anvil. Samya took over after that and hammered the metal into a large rectangle. I fixed any places that were slightly misshapen.

Once it was the right size, Rike reheated the sheet metal and then transferred it to a different anvil. Here, I took over and made the final adjustments to the overall shape. I put in the same amount of effort as I would for an elite model.

While I finished the blade of the first hoe, Rike and Samya were already working on heating and shaping the second one. When Samya was hammering, I was in charge of the forge and heating. When I was hammering, Rike was heating instead. We found a good rhythm and work moved along smoothly.

At last, I finished up the second of the two hoe blades, bringing our smithing work for the day to a close. For the handles, I picked out two good pieces of wood from the pile we had left over from construction work. Now, we had three hoes in total.

It took us about three hours to forge the hoes, so we had two to three hours left to work on the field. However, since I was still filled with the satisfaction of having just completed a portion of work, it was obviously hard to drudge up the motivation to continue. But the two ladies wanted to try out the hoes they'd just helped make with their own hands, so I rallied myself to continue.

Together, we returned to the field and plowed the soil. The dirt in this forest was hard, as I'd mentioned before, but it was no match for the strength I'd attained from cheats and the elite model hoes Rike and Samya were wielding. The plowing went by quickly.

The work reminded me of a TV show I'd seen in my old world: Three people in the show had set their sights on reinvigorating a neglected plot of land. They grew vegetables and harvested them to make a variety of dishes. The difference between us and them was speed. Thanks to our tools and other talents, we made short work of the dirt and finished plowing the entire patch of soil in

three hours.

It still didn't feel like a legitimate field, just a plot of tilled earth. However, the sun was starting to set. I felt vaguely nauseous at the idea of leaving the work incomplete, but if I put a positive spin on it, this was something to look forward to on our next vacation.

...But what if weeds started to grow in the meantime? I guess we'd just have to take our next break before that happened. It was a good motivator for us to be more proactive about taking vacations, so we called it a day there.

Just like that, our vacation came to an end. Tomorrow, we'd be going back to work, but I didn't feel any of the dread that I used to feel before Mondays in my old world.

Life here suited me. I was certain of it.

Chapter 4: Order Up! Two Shortwords Please

The next day, we returned to our usual work schedule. We'd first be making metal plates, before moving on to knives, shortwords, and then longwords in the following days.

This time around, I had Samya help us make the sheet metal plates, and all three of us worked together to melt, harden, and flatten the pieces. Of course, while the metal was cooling, we didn't have to do anything but leave it alone.

We distributed the rest of the work between us, which gave the whole process an efficiency boost. By working together like this, we were able to make twenty percent more plating than we had the last time.

There was still a lot of ore remaining. Clearly, we'd be receiving ore at a higher rate than we could use it, which meant that our total ore supply would never actually decrease. One of these days, we would end up with more materials than we knew what to do with, and I'd have to let Camilo know that he didn't need to procure any more for us.

Speaking of Camilo, I also wanted to ask him if I could add spears to our product lineup. They were practical weapons, and I'd already test-made a custom one.

And so, the day after we'd finished making the plate, we hunkered down to work on the weapons. We started with the two types of swords. The process was no different than usual, but we were undoubtedly faster than we used to be. I knew I could now count on Samya to take care of the first half of the process—melting and then forging the metal—so I could relax until it was time to deburr the blade. This way, I could store up and focus my energy where it was needed: forging elite models.

For three days straight, we dedicated ourselves to swordsmithing and quickly increasing our stock of items. By the time we completed everything, we had definitely made two weeks' worth of swords.

The plan for the following two days was to forge knives, but we'd have to make do without Samya's help. Our meat reserves were starting to dwindle, so she was going out to hunt instead of helping us in the workshop. That reminded me—I'd have to restock her arrowheads at some point too.

As for the smithing work, I was in charge of making the elite models and Rike the entry-level models. By now, the process was as comfortable as a chat with an old friend, so we zipped through the work. By evening, we'd already made a fair amount.

Maybe I should switch over to making entry-level models tomorrow.

As we were wrapping up and tidying the workshop, Samya returned. "I'm home!"

"Welcome home," I replied. "So? How was it?"

"I caught a giant boar this time."

"Good job."

"I know," she said smugly, and her chest puffed up with pride.

There's no doubt about it—she's an excellent hunter.

But I was curious about one more thing. "How were the arrowheads?"

"Sturdy! They bit deep into the boar with no problems," she said. "It'd be nice to have a few more as backup, but I still have a good amount left."

"Glad to hear it."

"The heads of boars are extremely hard, but your arrowhead punctured through the skull in one go! I think that not even an iron helmet could stop one of your arrows."

"Oh, really?" *Hmmm, were they too overpowered?*

Well, the arrows were one thing, but at the end of the day, an archer's skill with their bow was the truly important factor. My arrowheads didn't unbalance this world on quite the same level as, say, bringing in a gun or something.

Though we'd have to figure out how to hang and dress that large boar tomorrow, we were finished with work for today!

The next morning, we all headed to the lake together. Samya told us that she'd had to submerge the boar further into the lake where the water was deeper.

She and I would work together to pull the carcass to shore while Rike stayed on land and chopped down nearby trees for the carrying pallet. When we neared the spot Samya had marked, the boar's greenish pelt was visible through the water. In this forest, the boars grew vegetation like mosses or lichen over their coats, which both gave them their distinctive coloration and also acted as camouflage. I wasn't too clear on the details, but I did know that when they were crouching down, even these large creatures could be easily mistaken for a bush at first glance.

Samya had said that the boar she'd killed was huge, but I was still caught off guard by its sheer size. It was truly a monster! In my previous world, I'd heard that the boars could grow to be two meters tall, even taller than your average adult man. This one looked to be about that size too.

"Heeeave ho!" I hollered as Samya and I dragged it into the shallows. We soon reached the shore where Rike was waiting with some felled trees. The three of us worked together to lash the logs into a carrying platform, then we all knuckled down to lift the boar onto it.

Now we just had to bring it back home. Luckily, I had my cheats helping me out. Samya was one of the beastfolk and Rike a dwarf, so they both had plenty of muscle as well. With all of us pulling together, it wasn't a difficult journey per se, but returning still took us an hour longer than the trip out there.

When we arrived back at the cabin, we quickly strung and hoisted the boar up until it was suspended in midair, supported by the branch of a nearby tree. It had to be skinned and butchered, but I wouldn't be helping out with that today—the two women could handle it by themselves. Instead, I dismantled the wooden pallet so I could turn the wood into usable lumber. Since I was working alone, it took me a while to chop the logs into the correct lengths and thicknesses. Once I was done, I stored the lumber away with the rest of our supply.

I returned to check on Samya and Rike and saw that they'd finished up on their task too. As with the deer, I set aside a portion of the fresh meat for today's meals, and the rest I'd pickle with salt. For lunch, I sizzled up some boar meat steaks. The flavor did remind me somewhat of pork, but with a rough edge. I suppose that it would normally be called "gamey," but I rather liked it.

Apparently, Samya agreed with me because she said, "The boar's tasty."

"I think so too," Rike added. "It's a bit different from pork, but delicious in its own way."

"Yeah, the boars that live in this forest eat a good diet, so their meat is more flavorful when compared to the meat of boars from other parts of the world," Samya explained. "At least, that's what I've heard from travelers."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yup. But they have wild tempers and hard skulls that make them a tough target to take down. Most arrows won't pierce through the bone."

"I guess you have my arrows to thank for your successful hunt," I joked.

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, Samya agreed and said, "Yeah, they're a blessing."

Don't say that with such a straight face! You're making me blush...

In the afternoon, we continued to make knives. I wanted to have plenty of them stocked up by the end of the day, so I let Samya try her hand at the first half of the smithing process. Since we were only making entry-level models, I was sure she could handle it. Maybe it was because she'd been working with us so often, but she had a knack for smithing. Though, of course, she was still an amateur, so the outcomes were far from perfect. I'd still take over at the end so I could adjust the final shape and finish.

"We know that the Boss is amazing, but you've got skills too, Samya!" Rike said.

I'd recently noticed that Rike had started to speak more casually with Samya—it was around the time they'd finished building the two rooms together.

I was relieved to see them getting closer. It was a good sign of harmony in our home.

Despite the compliment, Samya didn't seem satisfied with her knife. "Hmmm, really? The knives I make don't hold a candle to Eizo's work."

"You can't compare yourself to the Boss."

"Truer words..." Samya agreed, and they both started laughing.

This is good, heartwarming even. I was exceedingly proud of this turn of events, but I tried not to let it distract me. Best not to get carried away and make an elite model knife by accident.

###

At last, it was time for us to return to the city.

The plan for the day was to drop off our goods at Camilo's and pick up the bedding, then head home. However, I was still curious about how Marius's sword was holding up, so I wanted to check on that today as well.

We bundled together all of the items we'd smithed over the last few days and loaded them onto the cart. Though we'd skipped a week of forging, we had enough goods to at least partially make up for last week's vacation. We definitely had more swords and knives than usual, so the cart was quite heavy, but Rike and I managed to pull it along together.

The journey was uneventful, and we soon arrived at the city fence. I looked around for Marius, but again, he was nowhere to be seen. However, the guard on duty was the same one who'd come with Marius to buy the longsword originally.

"Hello," I called out.

"Oh, it's you guys. Good morning," the guard replied.

I saw no point in being roundabout with my inquiries, so I decided on a blunt approach. "I haven't seen Marius around lately. Did anything happen?"

"Oh, um...he had something to do in the capital," the guard answered obliquely. "He left here a while ago." It was an awfully awkward response, so I figured I'd just have to ask around for the full details.

“That so? Well, I was only wondering about the condition of his sword,” I explained. “By the way, if you have any concerns with your sword, feel free to come find me at Camilo’s and let me know.”

“I will. I’ve fought with it several times already though, and so far, no problems.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said with a smile, but truthfully, his words sent a shiver down my spine.

He’d fought with the sword I’d made.

The guard before me looked whole and healthy, but I assumed that the same couldn’t be said of whomever he’d turned the sword against...

Of course, that was the whole point of a weapon. I couldn’t just turn a blind eye to the fact that the things I made were often used to hurt people. If I were to continue, I’d have to come to grips with this reality and accept it; I shouldn’t deny it nor become desensitized toward it.

With new resolve in my heart, I resumed my conversation with the guard and kept the same polite smile still glued on my face. “Give Marius my regards.” The guards in this city seemed more industrious than I’d assumed they’d be. Were the working conditions unusually good or something?

We bid farewell to the guard with a slight bow and then entered the city, which was bursting with energy.

Like always, the main street was bustling, filled with horse-drawn wagons and luggage carts. Camilo’s shop was located a little ways off the main road, and once we turned onto a side street, the foot traffic thinned out noticeably. It wasn’t a particularly dark or narrow street, but it also wasn’t the kind of place where people would linger if they didn’t have business in the area. We kept moving, the wheels of the cart rumbling behind us, and before too long we arrived at Camilo’s shop.

We took the cart around to the storehouse and called for a worker to open the doorway so we could pull our cargo inside. The employee left to fetch Camilo for us, and we headed up to the second-floor conference room. At least, that was what I’d named it; Camilo and his workers might call it something

completely different.

A short time later, Camilo and the head clerk—another title I had arbitrarily designated—entered the room. “Were you waiting long?” Camilo asked.

“Not at all,” I replied.

“Brought your usual?”

“Yeah. We have the knives and the two types of swords with us,” I confirmed. “We don’t quite have two full weeks’ worth of goods, but definitely more than a usual week. If you can’t sell it all, just set them aside for us.”

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem. In the last two weeks, I’ve completely sold out of your products. I’ve even had to start a wait list of sorts.”

“That’s great news,” I said. “By the way, how about the bedding?”

“Oh, I have it all sorted out. You wanted two sets, right?”

“Well, ideally, three...if you have enough in stock.” I’d completely forgotten about furnishing a guest room until we’d started making the beds, and now there was one extra than we’d originally planned. Extra bedding wasn’t an immediate need though; we could always pick up another set the next time we dropped by, or we could even swing by the Open Market to search for ourselves.

“Hm, actually, I think we should have enough,” Camilo said. “So you want the bedding, plus your usual ore, charcoal, salt, and wine, right?”

“Yeah, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Don’t mention it. We’re partners.”

At the end of our discussion, Camilo signaled to the head clerk with a meaningful gaze. He nodded, acknowledging the wordless instructions, and left the room.

With negotiations completed for the day, we headed home. As always, we were on our guard during the journey back, but it ended up being a quiet trip without any fuss. We soon had the cabin in our sights. After hauling in the ore, charcoal, and foodstuffs, we made up all the beds with our new linens.

“From tonight onward, we can all sleep in our own rooms,” I declared.

“It’s my first time with my own space,” Rike admitted, “so I’m a bit nervous.”

“You may have a few restless nights until you get used to it.” It was just like how some people couldn’t sleep if they used a different pillow than the one they were used to.

Rike and Samya carried their belongings into their new rooms, and I moved my things back into the master bedroom that the two of them had been using. Though it had been my room to begin with, I found the extra space unsettling—I hadn’t actually slept here in some time. Nevertheless, when I tucked myself in after dinner, I found the bed to be rather comfortable. I was used to sleeping at the desk, but of course, it was no match for being properly horizontal.

My body might look thirty on the outside, but I still had the soul of a forty-year-old. No harm in taking it easy on myself once in a while.

###

Starting the next morning, we set to work forging some more shortwords and longwords (after our usual routine of fetching water and breakfast, of course). Samya was also lending a hand today.

We’d just set up in the workshop and had started the smithing process when Samya froze in the middle of her task.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

Samya looked tense as she replied. “Someone’s coming.”

She turned to stare at the door that led outside. At that exact second, there was a telltale rapping against the wood.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

“I was told by Camilo to come here!” a slightly muffled voice proclaimed from the other side of the door. “I want to commission a sword!”

Immediately, I jumped up and lunged toward the door. “All right, all right, I’m coming!” I shouted, and the knocking stopped.

I took a big breath and exhaled a sigh, then freed the latch. Samya backed me

up, gaze vigilant; she had the shortsword I'd made yesterday already in her hand.

Slowly, I eased the door open.

On the other side of the threshold was a woman dressed in traveler's clothing. She had short and messy red hair, which was braided down one side. Over her clothes, she was wearing leather armor to protect her vitals; the armor was reinforced with metal—likely steel—although the pieces were clearly worn and had seen better days. One shortsword was hung at her waist alongside a small sack, and another was strapped to her back. I hypothesized that the second one was a backup. Rounding out her ensemble was a cloak and a large rucksack, also on her back, filled with what I guessed were tools.

She was tall, about 180 centimeters or so. Her eyes were large and bright with red coloration, and a scar from a knife wound was etched across her face. Some might say that the scar marred her beauty, but as for myself, I didn't particularly mind.

"Welcome," I said, unable to completely suppress the shock I was feeling.

The woman flashed me a broad smile and introduced herself. "You're the smith who's responsible for the weapons in Camilo's store, right? My name is Helen."

"That's me. I make swords and the like out here in the forest. I'm Eizo, the eccentric, the oddball, the blacksmith. Anyway, come in."

"Thanks."

I led her inside the workshop to a table where we could sit and talk. "First, I want to confirm, you came here alone?"

"Yeah," Helen said, nodding.

I didn't sense anyone else in the area, but I glanced at Samya to be sure. She gave me a short confirming nod.

"Were you attacked by any wolves on the way here?"

"Uh, no? I did see some adorable rabbits though."

The rabbits here were undeniably cute, and also delicious. We'd eaten some

for dinner yesterday. In any case, the wolves seemed to have judged Helen to be strong.

“It was difficult to find this place, but I saw the chimney smoke and followed it here,” Helen continued.

I see. That was the smoke produced from fanning the flames to heat the iron. Even if she had followed the smoke, it was no mean feat to come all the way here.

So, I decided—it was a go from me. She’d passed our test.

I relayed my answer to her. “All right, I’ll forge you a weapon as promised. What do you have in mind?”

Helen unstrapped the sheathed swords from her back and waist, then set them on the table. “I work as a mercenary, and these are my tools of trade for the moment,” she explained. “I want a more robust and sturdy weapon. Whether or not a sword can perform under the brutal conditions of the battlefield is the difference between life and death in my line of work. I often don’t have the luxury to even properly maintain my swords.”

“I understand.”

A female mercenary, huh? She must not have it easy. Though the scar on her face was the most eye-catching, she had smaller ones peppered all over her skin.

“Can I take a look at your swords?” I asked.

“Of course.”

I removed both from their scabbards and inspected them. They were of good quality and still had more life in them, but one of them had a few scratches and nicks on the blade. “They’re well made. Your swordsmith was skilled. Do you mind if I have my apprentice take a look as well?”

“Feel free.”

I glanced over to Rike, and she approached the table to examine one of the two swords. “They’re well made,” she confirmed. “Boss is the only swordsmith who can make a better weapon than this...or the only one I can think of at

least.”

Helen listened to Rike’s appraisal, then said in a booming voice, “It seems like I’ve come to the right place if you’ve even got a dwarf’s approval!”

She’s loud! Loud enough to make my ears ring. Well, we have no neighbors, so it’s not like anyone’s going to complain. It was probably a habit from battle. You had to make yourself heard in the middle of a fight, otherwise, you could lose your life. I wished she would be a little more aware of her surroundings though...

“Right then, how are you planning to use the sword?”

“How?” she asked, puzzled.

“For example, what kind of combat stance do you use? How do you wield your swords? The information will come in handy while I’m smithing.”

“Hmmm, let’s see... It’s hard to explain in words. How about I show you?” she offered.

“Sure.”

Helen exited the cabin first. Samya, Rike, and I trailed along after her. There was a wide clearing right outside the workshop with relatively little undergrowth. Helen got into a fighting stance, readied her swords, and was soon awhirl with movement.

She was a dual-wielder, but she didn’t use both swords in the same fashion. One sword she used to check and ward off her opponent’s attacks and the other to mount her own offense. She was also shockingly fast. From her movements, I judged that the sword she used primarily for defense was more likely to wear out first. Neither of her swords was heavily damaged though, so I’d bet she used them in rotation.

After a short while, Helen stopped her vigorous routine, letting out a deep sigh.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“I just can’t get in the mood without a real opponent,” she said, followed by, “Wait, I got it! Come fight me yourself.”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“How about you fight with Samy— I mean, the half-tiger girl?” I proposed.

“You look stronger,” was Helen’s simple answer.

“Hmmm...”

What to do, what to do? With my cheats, I could probably keep up with her, but...

Well, why not. She’s only demonstrating her moveset, so it’s not like she’d be seriously attacking me. I’d be able to learn more about her fighting style by experiencing it for myself anyway.

“Okay. Let’s do it,” I agreed. “Samya, lend me your sword.”

Samya seemed to have her doubts. “But, it’s not—”

“Everything’ll be fine,” I reassured her. She was clearly still reluctant, but regardless, she handed me the shortsword she was carrying.

“All right, I’m ready, but go easy on me please,” I said, drawing the sword.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Helen sprung at me with lightning speed. I yelped out in surprise and managed to just barely block her attack. But she had actually jumped in with her defensive sword. While my blade was occupied, she stabbed at me with her offensive sword, movements a blur. I twisted my wrist and feinted, as if I were going to intercept, but at the last moment I switched my grip and went in for the kill instead.

“Whoa!” Helen shouted, deflecting my blow with her offensive sword. Simultaneously, she made a play for my wide-open flank. I stepped back just in time for her sword to cut through the air where I had been standing.

“You’re not half bad,” she said.

“Not at all. Cut me some slack,” I begged.

She smirked and came at me, even faster this time. Once again, I rushed to receive her attack, trying to give as good as I got. We continued to spar for

another fifteen minutes.

“You’re strong!” Helen shouted, once again giving no thought to how loudly she was speaking. Finally, we came to a stop.

“I thought you were just going to show me some of your moves, but you attacked me for real,” I said.

“I’d only planned to exchange two or three blows with you, but it’s rare that I meet someone who can keep up with me. People call me ‘Lightning Blade,’ you know? You got my blood boiling. Sorry about that!”

Spoken like a true battle junkie... What have I gotten myself into?

“Anyway, at least I understand your needs better now. It’ll take, let’s see...two days to forge your sword, so you should come back here in three days’ time.”

“Hmm, do I have to leave today?” Helen asked.

“What would you do otherwise?”

Her answer was matter-of-fact. “Well, I’d take a short break first. Then, we can go for another round.”

“When exactly am I supposed to make your sword then?” I protested.

“Oh fine, you’ve got me there.”

“Glad that you agree.”

Sheesh, she’s a handful.

I thought she would give up now and go home, but to my surprise, she smiled merrily. “Then let me watch while you work!”

“Didn’t you hear me say it’ll take two days?” I asked incredulously.

“Just let me stay here.”

She’s relentless! But I didn’t have any reason to refuse. We’d already furnished the guest room and had even bought the bedding. We’d also just come back from the city yesterday, so our food supplies had been restocked. I figured that she might want to see something specific, but I wasn’t planning on asking for her motives.

I looked back at Samya and Rike; they both gave me discreet nods. I sighed quietly.

“You win. You can stay.”

“Yes! Just what I wanted to hear!” Helen exclaimed and slapped me on the shoulder. It hurt a little but reminded me that I was dealing with a well-known mercenary.

Without further delay, I showed Helen to the guest room.

“You live all the way out here, but you have a guest room?!” There was something else she was even more shocked by. “I can’t believe you even have such a fancy bed...”

It seemed like she’d rarely seen guest beds with proper headboards and built-in shelving, not even at rather well-to-do inns. An ornate bed may be out of place in a backwater cabin like ours, but this was my way of showing hospitality! I hoped she’d accept it for the gesture that it was, without asking any questions.

I’d agreed to her commission of two custom swords, but the task wasn’t something I could just jump into. It’d be a better use of my time to fulfill Camilo’s standing order today. Of course, I wanted Samya to help us out.

I suspected that we wouldn’t be able to make as many items as we usually could. However, we’d sold Camilo a fair amount last time, so there should be no problems...probably. Besides, I didn’t know anyone other than him who would’ve sent Helen to us, and if that were the case, he shouldn’t have any complaints. If we focus for the rest of the day, we should be able to make the minimum amount of goods needed for our next visit.

We got to work. Samya made the mold and cast the blades. Rike and I took over to deburr the surface of the swords, set their shape, and sharpen the edges. We were an efficient and well-oiled machine, concentrating on our individual tasks in perfect silence.

Samya was now completely used to the work. At this rate, I might be able to teach her how to better use the hammer and flatten out the metal.

In the meantime, Helen sat in the workshop and observed our routine. There

was nothing for her to do, but she seemed to enjoy watching swords materialize from raw metal, one after another. She looked on the entire time without uttering a single complaint.

Before the sun had set for the day, we were able to churn out a decent number of shortswords and longswords. Tomorrow, I'd start working on Helen's custom blades.

For dinner, I decided to cook a more extravagant meal than usual. We were hosting our first guest after all, and I wanted to go the whole nine yards.

As we ate, Helen told us the tale of her trip through the forest. "On my way here, I passed by this humongous deer! I couldn't believe my eyes."

"Aaah, you saw a tree deer. They're seriously massive," I concurred. They were bigger than most other wildlife in the forest and posed a solid threat, just from their sheer size alone. You did *not* want to end up on the wrong side of their antlers.

"One more thing," Helen continued. "I also saw a bear off in the distance."

Upon hearing Helen's words, Samya immediately stiffened. Helen likely picked up on Samya's discomfort—as expected of a trained mercenary—because she made a perturbed face and asked, "Wh-What's the matter?"

"She was once attacked by a bear and almost lost her life in the fight," I explained, summarizing the events of that fateful day.

Come to think of it, I'd never told Rike the story either, but she didn't look surprised. Perhaps she and Samya had discussed it before.

"So that's what happened... If I'd been fully equipped, I might've been able to take it down." Helen's response was deadpan and perfectly serious.

I waved her off and said reproachfully, "You shouldn't do anything so reckless. We're all friends here now. What if you go to face the bear, and the unthinkable happens? We'd be the ones who find your body... I can't even bring myself to think about it."

Helen stared at me with a vague air of puzzlement, but she nodded. "I got it."

###

We started out the next day with our usual morning routine: we ate breakfast all together, and then split up. Rike and I were going to be spending another day in the workshop, and I asked Samya to go out and gather medicinal herbs and fruits since I didn't have any tasks for her to help with today.

As for Helen, she wanted to observe the forging process, but we would need two days to finish the swords anyway, so I suggested that she go with Samya to explore the area today and then come watch us in the workshop tomorrow. Helen agreed easily, contrary to my expectations. Maybe it was because the woods had piqued her interest on her journey here, or perhaps she was the type who'd rather always be moving.

As the two headed out, Samya lectured Helen on the dangers of walking around in the forest. I couldn't help but smile when I saw them together because they already looked rather chummy. They almost could've been mistaken for sisters, although they were of different races. In my imagination, Samya was the older sister, and Helen the younger. What an interesting family they'd make!

Rike and I moved to the workshop. As I rolled up my sleeves in preparation for the day ahead, I declared, "Without further ado, it's time to make this workshop's first ever custom model product! I'm going to pour my heart and soul into this one." I was feeling more passionate than usual.

First, we selected enough metal plating from our reserves for one shortsword, and then heated that metal in the scorching firebed. Once it was hot all the way through, Rike took it out and hammered at the plate until it was thinner and longer. When it seemed to be long enough, she scored a line through the middle of the plate with a chisel, and then folded the metal at the seam she'd just created. After that, she reheated and hammered again, which pulled even more length from the metal.

Once she'd shaped it to the right length, it was my turn.

Making full use of my cheats and installed knowledge, I ensured that the metal was perfectly uniform throughout. When I quenched the blade at the end of the process, I wanted the sword to turn out solid but not brittle. As I worked, I also kept Helen's fighting style at the forefront of my mind.

Now that I'd finished the shaping of the blade, I waited for it to cool before hammering it again, which increased the sturdiness of the sword. Then I used a tool—it resembled a file or plane—to polish the surface until it gleamed.

For the hilt, I was going to attach a metal rod to the blade. This required some carefulness on my part; when I connected the two pieces, I had to make sure that the sword wouldn't break apart later at that joint.

I heated the rod and connected it with the blade using the hammer, making sure to pour my full concentration into the task. The sword got one final heating in the firebed, with specific focus on the joint between blade and hilt. The metal had now taken on a definitive sword-like shape, and once it was at the perfect temperature, I removed it from the fire and immediately dunked it in water to cool and quench the metal.

Now that I'd finished smithing the sword, I wanted to test out its durability. I secured the new blade in place and brought over one of the entry-level shortswords I'd made the day prior.

I gripped the entry-level blade and launched a huge swing at Helen's custom model shortsword.

Clang!

The sharp sound rang out around the workshop. The sword I was wielding had made perfect contact with the custom sword, but the latter didn't have even a single scratch on it. I slashed at it a few more times, but still, its surface remained perfectly unmarred. Looks like it passed the test.

But on the other hand...

"Guess I won't be able to sell this shortsword anymore," I lamented, staring at the entry-level model I had in my hand. When I inspected it carefully, I noticed that the blade was now nicked in several places. It was only an entry-level, so I wasn't surprised that the blade had worn out quickly.

At this point, Rike turned toward me, pausing in her own work on a knife. "Can't you just hone the edge or rehammer the blade again? It'd be as good as new."

"That may be true from a quality perspective, but it'd violate my aesthetic

principles to put a sword into circulation that I'd already used," I explained, before adding, "Of course, that's not counting when I test the sword right after I make it. I'll hammer this one out again and use it myself as a personal weapon."

I had the luxury of not needing to compromise my ideals because, luckily, we had enough money at the moment. We weren't wealthy by any means, but it was plenty for our day-to-day lives. It would've been a different story if we were strapped for cash, but I hoped to be able to stick to my beliefs from here on out too.

I said as much to Rike, and she chuckled. "I'm not surprised to hear you say that. You're one of those headstrong artisan types, aren't you, Boss?"

"Perhaps," I replied, returning her banter with a sly grin. I was one step closer to my ideal way of life. The progress sparked a small but very real sense of pleasure in me.

In any case, the custom sword had passed the durability test, so it was now on to the finishing touches. I only needed to do a final polish on the flat of the blade, and then sharpen the edge. As for the hilt, I heated and shaped a guard for the grip, and then attached it to the sword body. The entire grip was wrapped in leather that I'd harvested from one of the tree deer Samya had hunted.

To top off my first ever custom-order blade, I chiseled my insignia, a sitting fat cat, into the blade's pommel.

I raised the sword overhead. The metal reflected the flickering flames in the firebed and the whole sword seemed to glow. "That's one!" I whooped.

While recalling the blows I'd exchanged with Helen and how she'd wielded her swords, I gave this new blade a few experimental swings. The shortsword was lighter than it looked, and it fit perfectly in my hand.

Rike stared at me the entire time I was testing out the sword, fidgeting restlessly, and looked as if she were going to explode any second. "May I see it?"

"Of course," I said and handed her the sword.

Rike scrutinized it so closely that it seemed as if she didn't want to overlook

even a single atom of the composition. She turned it over every which way and even swung it lightly a few times, absorbing every little detail.

“How’s the quality?” I asked.

“No average blacksmith could make anything of this caliber. Even a fairly skilled smith wouldn’t be able to come near your level,” she replied. “Forgive me for mentioning your past, but I just want to say that the Nordic folk suffered a great loss on the day you left, regardless of the circumstances surrounding your departure.”

“That’s a high-level evaluation.”

She looked at me with a perfectly straight face. “That’s what it deserves. There’s not even a shadow of a doubt in my mind.”

Well, of course, it wasn’t your everyday sword. I’d tapped into every ounce of my skill while making it, just as I had when I’d made the knife that’d split the log in two. There was no way that this blade could be anywhere close to normal.

Unlike the knife, I’d prioritized durability when making this sword. If I were to strike a boulder with it, the edge would slice through the surface, but it wouldn’t split the stone in two. Of course, even *that* level of sharpness already defied common sense.

It was well within my ability to make a sword that could slice clean through a boulder if I truly wanted to. I realized that today while putting all my cheat abilities and installed data to use in forging Helen’s shortsword.

There was a caveat though: I could forge a sword that was either extremely durable or wickedly sharp, but not both at once. Such was the inherent limitation of steel, and my cheats couldn’t change that reality. But in a way, the limitation was a relief and not a hindrance. Because of it, I was free to make custom models with steel.

How do I put this? If I were to get my hands on a material that I could pull both durability and sharpness out of—say, for example, mithril or orichalcum—I would have to really search my soul before I could feel comfortable making any truly powerful weapons. A single sword was unlikely to make any major waves in the scale of the universe, but one could definitely be considered a hazard

from the perspective of a small region. I wasn't prepared to bear the mental and emotional burden of having anything I make become a strategic weapon of war.

"What's wrong?" Rike asked me, a worried expression on her face. "You seem upset."

"No, it's nothing. I'm not upset; I was just thinking." I reassured her with a smile and reached out to tousle her hair roughly. I'd nearly lost myself in distressing thoughts, but thanks to Rike, I was able to come back to myself.

Now satisfied with having finished one sword out of the pair, I decided to call it quits for the day. The second twin blade we could save for tomorrow. Rike had also completed the knife she'd been working on.

We'd extinguished the fire and had started to clean up the workshop when Samya and Helen returned from their harvesting.

"We're back!" Samya hollered.

"Welcome home. How did it go?"

"Hmmm," she mused and paused to consider. "Just okay."

Helen set down a basket filled with fever-reducing and antiseptic herbs, as well as some apple-like and raspberry-like fruits.

"Looks like a bountiful harvest to me," I said.

Samya just grumbled at that. "This is nothing compared to how much I can gather when the season's right."

"Well, the herbs are one thing, but fruit spoils quickly, so any more than this would go to waste. I think this is the perfect amount for us. Thanks," I said, trying to comfort her.

"Anyway, Eizo, that's not what's important right now." She stated this with an uncharacteristically serious expression.

I straightened up and gave her my full attention.

She looked into my eyes. "The wolves were more agitated than usual today. I'm now pretty certain that Helen did see a black bear."

Great. One more worry to add to my plate.

“Got it,” I acknowledged, “but for now, let’s eat.”

We had the usual medley of dishes, but apples—or their cousins anyway—were also on the menu today. The fresh fruit added a layer of luxury to our meal.

The fruits actually didn’t resemble apples in appearance, but their flavor was spot-on. They weren’t as delicious or sweet as the selectively bred apples back on Earth though. Regardless, I felt comforted by the nostalgic flavor, even though it wasn’t as if I’d eaten apples every day back then.

The women chatted about the apples as we ate.

“Sometimes you bite into one of these, and it ends up being sour, like really sour!” Samya said.

“That’s true,” Rike remarked. “When I was a child, I used to try and guess which ones were the sour ones.”

Helen also voiced her agreement. “Me too. I’m not a fan of sour foods.”

And I thought the one I’d had was already plenty sour... Maybe I should try cooking them instead. The heat would probably mellow out some of the acidity.

We finished dinner to the soundtrack of Samya, Rike, and Helen’s spirited conversation about fruits. Apparently, this world also had fruits that were similar to mikan oranges and watermelons. One of these days, I’d see if I could order some from Camilo.

###

The next day, Rike and I were to spend another shift forging in the workshop, and Samya was going out to hunt. She *could* take a break once in a while if she wanted to. Her weekly schedule could look something like this: hunting, smithing, gathering, hunting, smithing, visit the city, rest. I’d also originally planned to take rest days—guess I had to remember that from now on!

Helen would be observing us in the workshop today. We’d already made one sword yesterday, so we could spare her our trials and errors. I was confident we could put on a smooth and polished performance.

And so, we began. That said, the process was more or less the same as yesterday, minus some experimentation, so I won't hash through all the details again. Using everything we'd learned from making the first sword, we were able to finish the second one three hours earlier.

Helen watched us attentively from start to end. "You made it look so easy," she murmured appreciatively when it was over.

Rike swooped in to intercept the compliment, preening. "No one else can forge a sword as quickly as the Boss can."

"Not even you, Rike?" Helen asked curiously. By now, she'd learned both Samya's and Rike's names.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to reach his level in this lifetime."

"He's that good?"

Rike nodded firmly and straightened her shoulders with pride.

But you know...my skills are just cheats, so hearing your compliments only makes me feel guilty...

Since this was my first custom order, I decided to go all out and add some ornamentation to both shortswords. I took the tool that I usually used for smoothing out the blade and started working it on the middle of the sword. If the metal wasn't perfectly level, I could easily throw off the weight distribution of the swords, so I kept laser-focused on the task at hand. I stopped once the surfaces looked flawless, and then tried out a few moves with the swords; they both sliced cleanly through the air.

Next, I used a chisel to carve a design into the blade's surface. This was another place where I could ruin the sword's balance if I wasn't careful, but I borrowed the power of my cheats to ensure that didn't happen. I had a design in mind, and once I'd finished tracing it out on both swords, I went over the entire thing again to smooth and remove any remaining burrs that the chiseling had left behind. This entire process took up the three hours we'd saved earlier in the day.

Aaah, this reminds me of the scale models I used to make back in my old world! As I thought, I really do enjoy this kind of detailing work.

“And they’re done!” I exclaimed.

“Great!” Helen whooped, beaming with joy.

She immediately reached for the swords, but I stopped her. “It’s getting late. Let’s give them another day.”

“But why...” she grumbled. Her demeanor had done a complete one-eighty, and she was now wearing a petulant expression.

I understood how she was feeling—I was also the type to try out a shiny new toy as soon as I got it—but I decided to stand firm on my decision.

With impeccable timing, as usual, Samya arrived home right as we finished up. She’d hunted a few birds and brought them back with her. I dressed the fowls and made a simple sliced “chicken” breast dish. Of course, they were actually foliage birds, not chickens. To compensate for my lack of creativity on the meat front, I paired the dish with a raspberry sauce that I stewed from the look-alike berries Samya had picked yesterday. I also added some of the wine we had in the house.

“Eizo! This. Is. Awesome!” Samya shouted, looking like she was about to start jumping for joy at any moment. Sometimes, she had an almost childlike enthusiasm. Though she looked about twenty-five, on the inside, she seemed anything but. I wouldn’t go as far as to say she acted like she was five, but...

“Hey! Where are your manners?” I chided.

“But I’ve almost never had anything this delicious before!”

“I have to agree—we rarely ever ate this well back at my family workshop,” Rike said.

“That goes for me too,” Helen agreed. “This kind of meal is a rare treat.”

Apparently, both of them had also been surprised by tonight’s menu.



I'd never asked Rike her age before, but I'd guessed that she wasn't young in human years; I hadn't once seen her lose composure, at least in the time that I'd known her.

And what about Helen? The knife scar, along with her natural bearing that was surely adopted from her experience as a mercenary made her seem rather mature. However, I wouldn't be surprised if she were younger than her appearance suggested.

"Well, today's special. I finished forging my first commissioned swords today."

"True! Congrats," Samya said.

"Thanks," I replied.

"Let me congratulate you as well," Rike chimed in.

"Well, I have you to thank, since you helped me out. So thanks."

"Me too, bravo!" Helen cheered.

"You...you were the one who ordered..." I sputtered. "N-Never mind. Thank you."

We toasted with wine and celebrated into the night with plenty of food and drink to go around for everyone.

###

I returned from my routine trip to the lake the following morning to find Helen waiting for me in front of the house.

"Someone's up early again!" I called out as I neared the cabin.

She beamed at me, her pearly whites showing and her eyes sparkling, then said, "You finished the swords yesterday, right? When I thought about the fact that I'd get to try them out today, I just couldn't sit still. I hardly got a wink of sleep last night!"

She sure is spirited for someone who hadn't gotten any sleep. Just how much energy does she have? Or is this the manic side effect of sleep deprivation?

"Let's go inside," I suggested.

“Sure thing.”

She entered the cabin and threw herself onto one of the dining chairs. I came in behind her, stored the water jugs away in the kitchen, and started breakfast prep. As for the actual meal, all I can say is that it was one of the liveliest we’d had in a couple of days.

The moment we finished eating, Helen sprang up and made a beeline for the workshop. The three of us joined her.

“As promised, here are the two shortswords you commissioned,” I said, handing the two cloth-wrapped swords over to Helen.

Given her usual impatience, I expected her to immediately rip off the wrappings, but she unraveled the cloth tenderly, cradling the swords as if they were made of glass. She grew visibly more and more excited as the two swords were slowly revealed.

Finally, both of them were laid bare before her eyes. The steel gleamed in the light, and a chiseled lightning bolt design streaked through the center of each blade. Aside from the engraving, the blades were unornamented and exceedingly practical. After all, I’d designed them for function, not form. On the pommels, I’d chiseled my workshop’s sigil: the sitting fat cat.

“Take them out for a spin and tell me how they feel,” I said. “I think you’ll find them well-balanced.”

Helen wrapped her fingers gingerly around the hilts of the swords then gave them a few quick swings, and the blades sang as they whipped through the air. Strangely, I didn’t feel any fear watching her performance, though I knew I’d be instantly sliced to pieces if I accidentally stepped into the fray.

She continued her sequence for a while longer, moving with a grace like she was dancing, before coming to a perfect stop. Her shoulders heaved as she caught her breath.

“How are they?” I asked.

Helen made a movement like she was going to fling down the swords, but instead, she laid them carefully on the workshop floor. Immediately after, she threw herself at me and gave me a tight hug. “Amazing! Just amazing! They’re

absolutely perfect!” she shouted. “I made the right decision coming to you.”

“I see. I’m glad that you like—ow...ow ow ow ow! That hurts!”

Helen was hugging me so tightly I could barely breathe. It was painful, but as a blacksmith, I also felt both grateful and blessed to see her enthusiasm for the blades I’d made. *Though, I wouldn’t complain if she let me go now...*

In the end, Rike and Samya had to pry her off me.

“I’ve already tested out their durability, but if you have any problems, let me know and I’ll fix them up. You can either visit Camilo or come straight here, but either way, I’d prefer if you tell me before you use them in an actual battle,” I told her once I was free of her bear hug.

I was duty bound as the swordsmith to repair anything that was broken, but if the swords were to fail on the battlefield, she wasn’t likely to get a chance to come and tell me. Unlike the swords I made for mass-production purposes, I’d come to know Helen and had tailor-made these swords to her tastes, so I was acutely aware of the responsibility I bore.

“Got it. I train regularly, so if I notice anything while I’m practicing, I’ll call on you again.”

“Oh, there’s also the matter of payment,” I brought up.

“How much?”

“Whatever you want to pay is fine.”

“Are you sure?” Helen asked. “I don’t know anything about the market rates though.”

“I don’t mind. I decided that I would use a pay-what-you-want system for commissions, so pay me however much the swords are worth to you.”

In the two days it had taken to make Helen’s commission, I could’ve forged quite a few entry-level swords. If I were to set prices from a strictly logical point of view, then I should receive no less than the total profit I could’ve made from the entry-levels. On the other hand, I’m sure some people out there would be content to take advantage of my generosity and pay me a single silver coin, but I hoped those kinds of cheapskates would be few and far between. Especially

considering the fact that they'd need to be willing to trek all the way out here in the first place.

Besides my time, there was also the price of the ore and charcoal I'd used. If I was compensated at least for the raw materials, I would be able to continue my trade as a blacksmith, even though I'd be working at a loss.

"Hmmm..." Maybe it was because she wasn't familiar with the market, as she'd said, but Helen took her time puzzling over what to do.

I'd be happy if she were to give me at least a gold coin.

"I've made up my mind," Helen declared, opening her bag and taking out her coin purse. "Here you go." She dropped two gold coins and several silver ones into my hand.

"Perfect."

"I guess I should've asked before I handed the money over, but are you sure it's enough? It's a little more than the price of my original swords."

Those two swords had been quite expensive then. They were high caliber, so the price checked out.

"Yeah, this is good enough. Your other swords were high quality, so I'm satisfied with this amount," I said. "In fact, it may even be a smidge too much."

"O-Okay." She still seemed to be a tad unsure about the price, but she shook my hand vigorously and said, loud as usual, "Thanks!"

We watched as she turned around and bounded off into the forest. With her energy and enthusiasm, even if she stumbled upon the black bear, she seemed likely to face it down without a second thought. She'd probably even use it as a chance to test out her new hardware.

Once we couldn't see Helen any longer, the three of us turned around and went back indoors in total sync.

"Man, her skills were no joke," I murmured. I was sure her strength was on par with that of black bears.

"It took both our strength combined to peel her off you, and even then it was no easy feat," Samya commented.

“A boisterous and rowdy person,” Rike added.

Helen had left a deep impression on both of them too. It was rare to meet someone with such a big personality. Of course, it’d be a problem if people like Helen could be found anywhere and everywhere—that is, the type of person who could draw out the full strength of both a member of the beastfolk and a dwarf.

“Anyway, for today, let’s go back to forging short and longswords. Tomorrow, we’ll go deliver them to the city.”

“Kay.”

“Understood, Boss.”

With both women in agreement, we started the day’s work. We’d only hosted a guest and diverged from our routine for two short days, but I was nonetheless filled with the ease of finally being able to return to normal. I prepared the raw materials as usual, smithed with the help of Samya and Rike as usual, and polished off swords, again, as usual.

To be honest, it hadn’t been very long since I’d begun my life in this world, but before I knew it, I’d come to expect this particular brand of normalcy. Warmth and joy stirred in my heart, but I managed to hide my feelings from Samya and her perceptive senses this time.

###

We enjoyed two days of peace before the incident happened.

Samya had been out hunting as usual when she had an untimely run-in with a black bear. It had probably been the same one that Helen had seen, and the one behind the wolves’ recent agitation. As I listened to Samya’s tense report, scenes from the day we’d first met scrolled one by one through my head.

Finally, I couldn’t keep rein over my emotions any longer. “Are you okay?! You’re not hurt, are you?!” I burst out.

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine,” Samya stammered. “I ran back here as soon as I sensed its presence. It came closer to the cabin than I thought it would though. I think I gave it the slip, but it has a good nose. What if it followed me back?”

“Thank goodness you’re okay.”

I felt relieved that Samya was unharmed, but what now? What should we do if it actually manages to trace Samya home? If it lingered around in the area, we could run into it at any time, and that would cause all kinds of problems.

I was the one most likely to encounter it since I went out every morning for water, but Samya and Rike periodically made outside excursions as well. What if they stumbled upon it during one of their trips?

I shook my head to free myself from foreboding thoughts. My focus needed to be on action.

There was no way my knife would be enough in a fight against a bear, but I couldn’t waste the time to forge a custom longsword either. However, this might just be the perfect opportunity to finally test out the custom spear I’d made.

That settled it.

“I’m going out,” I declared.

“W-Wait, y-you can’t be...” Samya faltered, unable to finish her thought.

“If I find it, I’ll take care of it. Latch both doors, and don’t open them until I come back.”

“Then I’ll go with you!”

“No. To be honest, if something happens and I’m forced to retreat, I’m not confident that I’ll be able to cover you. It’s not that I don’t trust your archery skills, Samya, but leave this one to me.”

“Damn it,” she cursed. “You better come back to us.”

“Promise me too,” Rike added. “Please come home safely, Boss.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t abandon my precious family, not when we’ve all come together like this.”

Grabbing the spear from the workshop, I left the cabin. I heard the *thunk* of the latch falling into place, signifying that Samya and Rike had secured the doors behind me like I’d told them to.

As for me, I started off into the forest.

It's gloomier here than usual, I thought, right as raindrops started to fall. This was the first rain since I'd come to this world.

I headed in the direction that gave me the deepest sense of foreboding. It was a sensation that practically screamed, "If you come this way, you're in for a nasty surprise."

I wasn't used to paying such close attention to my surroundings. On our trips through the forest to the city, Samya was always on guard duty. Right now, it would be easy for me to overlook subtle indicators of danger. In spite of my enhanced strength and cheat skills, I couldn't be cocky; death waited at the other side of any careless mistakes. Luckily—in a sense of the word—the warning signs that the giant black bear left behind were anything but subtle, and I could perceive them without any difficulty.

Surrounded by the pitter-patter of the falling rain, I doggedly strained my ears for any sounds made by the black bear, while simultaneously ensuring that the noise of my own movements blended into the choir of nature.

According to Samya's information, bears usually returned to their dens before too long, even when the weather was sunny and clear. But if that were the case in this instance, then I should've long stopped being able to sense the bear's presence with my cheat-heightened senses. In other words, it must still be rambling around this area. Perhaps the scent of humans had been previously ingrained in its memory; that had often been the reason behind bear attacks back on Earth. There was a good chance that it was holding a grudge against humans, including the beastfolk that lived in the forest.

With the rain washing away my scent, today was the perfect time for me to take it out. I couldn't let this opportunity pass me by.

"Brace yourself, Eizo," I mumbled under my breath.

In my last world, it had cost me no less than my life to save one single cat, but here I was, steeling myself to kill a bear. I couldn't help but laugh at the irony of it all. Nevertheless, I had no choice but to face down the bear. I would stop at nothing to protect Samya and Rike, who'd become like family to me, and the new normal I'd established here in this world. It was everything I held dear.

I took my time, stepping further and further toward the direction where I sensed the most danger. I couldn't tell how much time had passed already. This hunt felt simultaneously too long and too short.

Suddenly, my sense of danger, my survival instincts, and my skills converged at one point, and all the alarm bells in my mind went off at once. It was like a Klaxon siren was blaring in my head.

Found it.

I'd known to expect a large black bear, but this thing wasn't just large... It was a monster. It was as large as even the Ussuri brown bears native to Japan that I'd seen on TV.

"You can't be the one that attacked Samya," I muttered. This bear's claws would've easily sliced through leather armor; one blow from those paws would've ended Samya's life. In comparison, the bear from back then had been scared away by my approach, so I was almost sure that this was a different one. Although I couldn't entirely rule out the possibility that the bear from before had gone through a growth spurt over the last several weeks.

"Sorry, it's not that I hold any grudges against you..." I carefully shifted into position, pointing the tip of the spear toward the bear, and I prayed that there weren't any starving cubs waiting back in its den.

Alarm bells were still ringing in my head, but strangely, I didn't think this bear could stop me with a single punch. I wasn't one hundred percent positive I would win, but I was certainly immensely grateful for the cheats I'd received.

The bear slowly shifted its massive bulk and stood up on its hind legs. It was gigantic, almost twice my height, but I couldn't back down. I stood my ground and braced myself over my spear, the point of the weapon facing forward.

It collapsed back onto all fours and charged at me. There was no way I could retreat in time, even if I'd wanted to. One of us, either me or the bear, would not make it out of this showdown alive.

The bear's claws flew at me, and I managed to sidestep them just in the nick of time. I would've been seriously wounded if its claws had so much as grazed me. I'd intended to counterattack when it charged past me, but that seemed

impossible. It was fast, more so than I'd anticipated. My cheats had given me the strength to survive so far, but had I been a normal human, I would've been a goner.

I considered trying to cripple its movements with a low sweep aimed at its legs, but on second thought, that didn't seem like it would be very effective.

The bear quickly turned around to face me again, but I was a step faster, and I swiftly thrust the spear at the bear, burying the tip into its flank. The blade was so sharp that it cut through the bear like its flesh was made of butter. However, because of my cheats, I could perceive that the wound was merely a shallow one. In truth, I hadn't been able to gain enough traction on the muddy ground to put any strength into my thrust.

I yanked out the spear and retreated rapidly, but I wasn't fast enough to completely avoid the bear's retaliatory attack. It landed a swipe at my chest with its front paws, knocking all the air out of my lungs. Luckily, since I had already been backing away, the damage was minimal.

I absorbed the blow and rolled away to break my fall, regaining my footing in short order. Thank god I was thirty again—there was no way I would've reacted half as well if I'd been forty.

I launched myself forward, ducking just in time for the bear's claws to whistle through the air a hair's width from the top of my head. I stopped right in front of it. Its huge form loomed above me with arms still outstretched.

"Victory is mine!" I yelled as I thrust the spear into the bear with all my strength. The tip passed through the bear's body with little resistance. Samya had once said that the way my blades cut through targets with such ease was gross, or something to that effect. I had to admit, it was an acquired taste...to say the least.



But I felt the reverberations of the blow through my arm this time, meaning that the spear had pierced deep through the bear's hide. The bear flung me away, and I tumbled to the ground from the force of the attack.

In the process, the spear slipped out of my hands.

The bear swiped at the spear lodged within its chest, once, and then pawed at it again in futile desperation. Finally, its massive body crashed to the ground.

The bear collapsed on its side, so it didn't crush the spear. In fact, despite my rough handling, the spear still looked like new. Since it was a custom model, it was likely more durable than a normal one. I'd have to test out that theory later on.

Once the commotion from the bear's fall died down, all was quiet except for the whisper of the falling rain. With my knife drawn, I approached the bear slowly and carefully on tiptoe. The knife was the last of my weapons, but it was better than having nothing else at all.

It didn't look to be breathing. To double-check, I hesitantly prodded at the bear with the tip of my foot. There was no reaction. Without dropping my guard, I wrapped my fingers around the pole of the spear and pulled it out.

Blood gushed from the wound, soaking the bear's hide and the mud below. The vivid crimson blood mixed with the rain, flowing across the ground and sinking into the earth. The bear did not so much as twitch.

I did it. I killed it.

All the strength left my legs the moment I finally confirmed the bear was dead. Needless to say, in my previous life, I'd never survived a brush with death—that truck *had* succeeded in killing me, after all.

This was a close call, to say the least, and I owed my survival entirely to my cheats and installed knowledge.

I let out a deep sigh, slowly coming back to my senses. Now that I was no longer high on adrenaline, various aches and pains were making themselves known across my body. Regardless of my cheats, it was hard to remain unscathed after being thrown to the ground by a giant bear. I had scrapes and

bruises everywhere.

I tested to see if I could move, and luckily everything seemed to be in working condition. I was thankful that I hadn't broken any bones—that would've put a pause on any carpentry or blacksmithing for a while. As it was, I'd still need a day or two to recover.

I stared solemnly at the fallen corpse of the bear and then brought my hands together in prayer.

I'm sorry. You haven't done us any harm, but we couldn't just wait like sitting ducks for you to come. I'll live out the rest of your years in your stead.

Its life may have been over, but I was able to live on because of that.

Now, what am I supposed to do with the body?

If I left it lying out, scavengers would pick the meat from its bones. It was the easy and natural solution, but as the one who'd taken its life, I wanted myself and my family to be the ones who both honored and ate it.

In this world, I was substantially stronger than I had been back in my old life. If I put my back into it, I might be able to...

I shouldered my spear. "Let's do this." I grunted as I heaved the bear onto my shoulder by its forearms. It was unbelievably heavy; if I remembered correctly, even a small Ussuri brown bear weighed about 250 kilograms. Yet, despite its weight, I was still able to drag it along. I hoped the rain would wash away the blood it was tracking behind us.

The rain made the ground slippery. Between that and my injuries, progress was slower than I'd imagined. It would be a major pain in the ass if I were attacked by another bear or wolf, so I wanted to hurry it up. On the other hand, rushing might actually cause me to miss any warning signs of other predators. I had no choice but to take it one step at a time.

After a long while, several times longer than my journey from the cabin had taken, I made it halfway home. The rain had died to a drizzle, so it was due to clear up soon. Once it stopped raining, I'd be able to move a touch faster.

It was time for a break. I was exhausted.

I was just about to throw my spear and the bear's arm off my shoulder when something came flying at me from a nearby thicket.

"Aaagh!"

I was knocked down to the ground without even a spare second to pull out my knife. Whatever had pinned me down was now getting up and turning to face the bear in a low crouch, unsheathed knife in hand and ready.

It was Samya.

She looked just as cute and friendly as she had the day I'd woken up to see her with her hand on my throat, and she stood before the bear with rage burning in her eyes.

I rose to my feet and called out to her. "Samya! I'm okay! It's already dead!"

She twitched and turned back to face me. "Are you sure? Are you absolutely, one hundred percent positive you're fine?"

"Yeah. I have a few scrapes and bruises, and I'm sore all over, but no major injuries."

Upon hearing that, Samya launched herself toward me once more. I was caught off guard again, but unlike the first time, I managed to keep on my feet.

"Thank god... I'm so glad. I-I can't..." she cried, sobbing.

I stroked her head as she wept.

There was another rustling sound coming from the bushes. This time I was prepared. Samya was a native inhabitant of this forest and half-tiger, so she was an expert at moving silently and erasing her presence. However, this one was different.

"Rike," I said.

"Have I come at a bad time, Boss?" Rike said by way of a greeting.

"Of course not."

Of course...not...right?

Samya was still sniffing with her face buried in my chest and clinging to me with all her strength, which was considerable since she was one of the

beastfolk. My wounded and battered body was hurting all over from her tight embrace, but I figured that was a secret I'd better keep to myself.

"Samya was worried about how long you were away," Rike explained. "She said that if you had been able to take down the bear, you should've been back a long time ago, so we came out to find you."

"But you were putting yourselves in danger by leaving the safety of the cabin," I griped.

"You try explaining that to a young woman in love. Anyway, Samya smelled your scent mingled with the bear's, both coming our way, and we hid to lay an ambush in case the worst had happened."

"I see."

She must not have been able to get a good look from her angle. With the bear's arm thrown over my shoulder, at first glance it must've looked like the bear was biting down on me, rather than me carrying it. The first move Samya had made was to take me back from the bear. That's why she'd launched herself at me like that.

I pretended I didn't hear the part about her being in love. They both came because they were worried about me, so first and foremost, I had to give my thanks. "Thank you, Rike."

"No, don't thank me. Samya's the one who deserves it," Rike said.

"You too, Samya. Thanks," I said with genuine emotion.

"It's nothing," she mumbled. She had calmed down a little, but it didn't seem like she had any intention of letting me go.

Oh, what am I supposed to do with you?

"Come on. Let's go home," I suggested gently, petting her head.

"O-Okay," she said and reluctantly let go of me.

"Boss," Rike interjected, "is the bear truly dead, once and for all?"

"Yeah. I haven't gotten a chance to dress it yet, but I'd hoped to butcher it."

"There aren't many people, let alone blacksmiths of all things, who've

confronted a bear and come out the other side in one piece,” Rike said. “There are few dwarves who could boast of that either.”

I flashed her a quick grin. “I was just lucky.”

“Sure, we can pretend that’s all it was,” she said and sighed, letting me off the hook for the day.

“All right, time to get this bad boy back on my shoulder.”

Samya frowned, looking at me with worry in her eyes. “Are you sure? What about your injuries?”

“I’ve already made it halfway, so we’re practically already home. I can do it. Don’t worry,” I bluffed. Not that I didn’t believe it to some extent.

“If you’re sure, Eizo...” Samya said hesitantly.

I gave my spear to Rike to carry, while Samya and I each picked up an arm and hoisted them onto our shoulders. With Rike’s height, the spear looked like a pike. While we trudged back home, Rike was entranced by the spear. It was a custom model after all.

“You’ll trip if you don’t watch where you’re going,” I warned. She reminded me of the youngsters back on Earth who were always absorbed by their phone screens, even while walking. But when it came down to it, a spear was still a bladed weapon. It was dangerous, so I wanted her to be more cautious.

We’d finally reached the lake and were nearly home. After a brief discussion with Samya, we decided to sink the bear into the water until tomorrow. It took us just short of another half hour to return to the cabin.

When we were finally indoors, Rike said, “I’ll prepare hot water and a meal. Samya, can you take Boss to his room?”

“Yeah, got it.”

“No, wait, I can make it there myself!” I protested.

“Now, now, be a good boy and listen to the grown-ups,” Samya said.

I could tell by her tone she wasn’t planning on taking no for an answer. “Fine.”

“I’ll lend you my shoulder. Let’s go.” Supported by Samya, I staggered to my room.

I sat down on the stool since I was still covered in mud and I didn’t want to dirty the bed.

“Yeouch.” The scratches didn’t hurt too bad, but the places where I’d been hit were a different story—my body felt like one giant bruise.

“T-Take it slow!” Samya said, flustered.

“Got it, got it. Don’t worry,” I said in a soothing tone. “I was knocked around a bit, so I can’t say I’m not sore. On the bright side, I don’t have any deep cuts or broken bones.”

Her eyes searched my face anxiously. “Are you telling the truth?”

“Yeah,” I said reassuringly.

Hearing my response, Samya appeared relieved. She was more of a worrywart than she looked, but I didn’t say that aloud. I had a hunch that she’d take offense.

“I have to wipe myself down. Can you let me know when the water is hot, Samya?”

“Y-Yeah. I’ll go check on it,” she said.

A peaceful silence fell over the room when Samya left, my first quiet moment in a while. Now that I was safe in my own home, my body was clamoring for rest.

I can’t...keep my eyes...open. I...have to stay...awake...

I awoke languidly, feeling like my head was still up in the clouds...which meant that I had been sleeping. Damn! I hadn’t wiped myself down.

Agitated, I sat up, locking eyes with a startled Samya. I’m sure her look of surprise was mirrored on my face as well. For a lack of anything better to say, I stuttered, “G-Good morning.”

“Y-Yeah. Morning,” Samya replied, her expression still flustered.

“Was I sleeping?”

“Uh huh. Like a log. Rike said it wasn’t good to leave you covered in dirt, so the two of us wiped you down with hot water and laid you out on the bed,” she explained. “Oh, but we left your underwear on.”

“O-Oh, okay. Thanks,” I said awkwardly.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I lay back down on the bed again right as Rike entered the room.

“Boss, you’re awake,” she said.

“Yeah. Seems like I owe you one too, Rike.”

“It was nothing,” she replied. “Oh, that’s right. Yesterday, Samya came out yelling, ‘Eizo is—’”

“Gaaah!!!” Samya shouted. Her screech sounded almost exactly like a tiger’s roar. “A-A-A-Are you crazy?! Don’t tell him that!”

“Hmmm, and why not? Are you feeling shy?” Rike teased, used to handling a flustered Samya. *When did she get so good at that?*

Taking advantage of the commotion, I tried to slip in an agenda item of my own. “You know you can stop calling me ‘Boss’ too, right, Rike?”

“No, that’s impossible, Boss,” she said, shooting me down without a second thought.

Epilogue: The Name of the Legend

“Good morning, Sire.”

I was busy sitting by the window, staring at nothing in particular, and I turned around to look at the person who’d interrupted. “Oh, it’s just you. Good morning.” I sighed.

“There is a crowd outside the gates as usual. They are all here for an opportunity to greet the hero,” Catalina said. She was dressed casually today in unrestrictive clothing.

“Yes, no doubt,” I mumbled.

People had been swarming outside my residence ever since I’d returned from that fateful expedition, and today offered no reprieve. The line of supplicants stretched out into the distance. I had asked Master Camilo for help with the overwhelming number of people who’d come to see me, and he’d promised to dispatch reinforcements from Count Eimoor’s estate. It had been a generous offer and I’d gratefully accepted. The guards were now helping with crowd control.

“*He* refused the mission because he wanted to avoid this exact scenario, didn’t he?” I asked bitterly.

“I cannot be certain, but I believe the likelihood is high,” Catalina replied. “There is no doubt that he feels a reluctance toward holding audiences, although I myself have had the pleasure of meeting with him several times. His reticence has only deepened since that incident.”

This time around, it would’ve been more expedient for him to have both forged the weapon *and* taken it into battle—his skills were indeed up to the task—but I’d been appointed because he’d staunchly refused to fight. Apparently, he’d said, “I’ll forge the sword, but I won’t wield it. Find someone else to undertake the mission itself, otherwise I won’t make the sword at all.”

When I had been presented with the mission, I’d of course accepted it. My

orders had come from royalty after all, and it would've been difficult to decline. In addition, I had my pride as one of the best—if not *the* best—knights in my order. However, I certainly would've thought twice about agreeing if I'd known that endless, unruly crowds were part of the deal.

Had he not been staunchly against it, there was no doubt that he would've taken care of the situation more quickly on his own. To be blunt, his skills outstripped mine. The battle would've been a cinch for a man who was rumored to have fought Lightning Blade to a standstill.

I leaned back in my seat, shut my eyes, and thought back to that day's events.

After a grueling and hazardous trek through the mountains, my company and I arrived at last to the ridge where the monster we hunted was said to reside. Only a short but steep climb left to go.

The beast had been terrorizing the nearby village. It had, as of late, taken to gorging itself on the villagers' cows and sheep, making it impossible for people to live out their lives in peace.

The crown had decided that military force was required to subdue the beast, and I'd been chosen to lead the expedition. That was how I found myself on that ridge, in the middle of the mountains, greatsword in hand.

It had been no easy feat to procure this particular sword. Let me ask you—what kind of smith would choose to live in the Black Forest? I'd protested the condition to Master Camilo, but he'd insisted; apparently, anyone who wanted to commission a weapon from this blacksmith had to visit the workshop alone and in person. I'd had no choice but to make my way through the forest, which was a place not known for its safety.

Needless to say, I'd gone in with a healthy dose of skepticism, but the blacksmith had been there in the middle of the forest, just where Master Camilo had promised he'd be. Even then, I hadn't been entirely convinced that I wasn't being made a fool of, but despite his surly appearance and the stereotype of blacksmiths already in my mind, he'd upturned my expectations. He was actually quite a genial fellow.

What'd surprised me more than anything was that he had multiple wives. Had

blacksmithing always been such a glamorous profession?

I'd also asked him why he'd chosen to live in such an inconvenient location. Wouldn't he get more business if he located his workshop somewhere more central? However, he'd merely smiled at my question and had said that it was a long story. He had mentioned that he'd come from the north, and his name had sounded Nordic as well. At that point, I'd thought it rude to question his circumstances any further, so in the end, I'd left without hearing any of the details.

In any case, that was the enigmatic quest I'd undertaken to get ahold of the sword I was now holding. I'd already tested out the blade, and there was no reason to doubt the skills of the blacksmith. So, in other words, I couldn't use the sword as an excuse if I were to fail. The success of this mission lay on my shoulders alone, and that burden was heavier than the massive greatsword.

After a steep climb, we finally reached our destination. Making sure to remain undercover, we peeked into the valley beneath the ridge and saw our target breathing deeply in slumber.

I turned to my subordinates. "There it is," I murmured.

"It sure is sleeping peacefully. Shall we engage?" one of them asked.

"Yes, begin the preparations," I ordered the men while keeping my voice low. The best course of action by far was to attack while it was asleep.

We started to offload our luggage, keeping our movements slow and quiet. We had brought along four ballistae, each loaded with giant bolas, which were non-lethal projectiles made of two heavy weights connected together by a huge rope. Once they hit their mark, the bolas were guaranteed to snare their target. The bulk of the preparation before our attack involved moving the ballistae into position and adjusting their direction.

"Remember. Launch them if you see even the slightest hint of movement," I whispered to the commanding officer of the archery unit. This force of archers was often deployed during castle sieges.

The officer had been on similar expeditions to subdue magical creatures, and so he knew to keep his voice low. "Yes, Sire."

The archers would launch the bolas, and then quickly follow up with a wave of long arrows. Speed was of the essence in today's battle; we had to slay the beast quickly because if we gave it any opening to retaliate, it would demolish us in a heartbeat.

And so, we circled closer and closer to our target trepidatiously, making sure that each ballista had a clear line of sight.

With any luck, I'd be able to sneak up and chop off its head while it was still slumbering.

But of course, that hope was in vain.

When I was a mere twenty meters away, it blinked open its massive eyes. Without wasting a second, I broke into a run, sword held aloft and ready before me.

As I sprinted forward, I yelled, "Fire!!!"

Four bolas were immediately launched from the ballistae, and they hurtled through the air toward their target. The monster looked up at the projectiles, startled, but it couldn't avoid them in time. The battle-hardened archery unit had impeccable aim, and the bolas hit their target dead on, tangling up the monster's legs and wings.

Our mark was a magical beast whose gigantic body was covered with scales as hard as diamonds. It had wings with which it ruled the skies, and it was long and slim like a snake. When it was on the ground, it crawled about on all fours.

You guessed it.

We were dealing with a dragon.

It struggled fiercely against its bonds. However, even though dragons were infamous for their strength and they could easily dominate the majority of the animal kingdom, the ropes of the bolas held fast. These were also custom items forged by *that* blacksmith, from none other material than mithril.

I vividly recalled the moment he'd given them to me: "If you're going up against a dragon, you can't settle for anything less," he'd said with a sunny grin. "Since you paid me so generously for the greatsword, I'll throw these in as a

bonus.” I’d been grateful, but after our conversation, his wives had twisted his ears for his recklessness. His grimace of pain and embarrassment was a detail I’m sure he’d prefer I forgot.

“Your prediction was spot on,” I muttered to myself.

With a smile identical to the grin he’d worn, I dashed straight at the dragon’s throat.

The beast shifted its enormous head to face me, jaws gaping wide open. Deep within its mouth, I could see the smoldering of a burning fire.

I braced myself, sword held before me, with the flat of the blade facing the dragon. I’d acted just in time—with a thunderous rumble, the air around me was set aflame. I alone stood in the middle of the firestorm.

It was scorching hot. The dragon’s breath could’ve melted iron.

If I’d been hit with the fire blast directly, I would’ve been completely incinerated without a single mote of ash remaining. However, the greatsword shielded me from the flames, and the metal glowed a glacial blue as if it were frozen.

I waited for the fire to begin petering out before I resumed my headlong charge. The dragon’s head was now directly before me. I couldn’t tell if it still had eyes on me or not, but it had paused in confusion. I guessed that it had probably never met a person or creature that could survive its fiery breath.

I knew myself to be softhearted—just as much as the blacksmith, if not more so. It was a weakness that the other knights in the order liked to tease me for, but this was one chance I couldn’t let slip by. While the dragon was still perplexed, I steeled my heart, leveled my greatsword at its neck, and chopped off its head in one fell swoop.

For my bravery, His Majesty the King himself had bestowed upon me the name “Dragonslayer,” along with the title of baron. I was no longer just Bernhardt Ulrich; I, and my successors, would forever carry the name of Drachentöter.

My father, Viscount Ulrich, was not happy with the circumstances. As the

second son, I wasn't eligible to succeed his estate anyway—but my rise in rank, along with the name change, must've felt like a slap in the face.

Needless to say, killing a dragon wasn't an everyday occurrence. We wouldn't have confronted the dragon at all had it not started terrorizing the villages. Rumors about the birth of a hero had spread like wildfire through the kingdom, and that "hero" label was now the source of all my troubles.

Half the people crowding before my gates were here to offer up their daughter's hand in marriage; they craved the honor of becoming extended family to new nobility.

So far, I'd turned them all down. Every. Single. One.

The other half of the crowd was here to request a meeting with the blacksmith who'd forged my sword. I turned most of these away as well because both Master Camilo and Master Eizo had asked that I keep my sword's origins a secret. I didn't tell anyone about Master Camilo either. Most people gave up after I'd rebuffed them once.

There was only one exception: a youth who returned over and over again to beg for information. He'd said that he wouldn't stop until I agreed to tell him.

Today, I finally broke under his siege. After making him promise not to tell a single other soul, I informed him of Master Camilo.

Later on, I often wondered whether I'd made the right decision, but eventually, the question resolved itself in my favor.

Armed with a sword forged by the elusive blacksmith, the youth went on to challenge the Demon Queen, no longer as a mere boy, but as a hero.

The Story of How We Met I: The Fateful Day

“That was the most wondrous time of my life. Even if I could, I wouldn’t change a single thing.”

Those were the words of the female dwarf accompanying me. She was over 120 years old, but thanks to her dwarven genes, she looked half her age.

The Bearer of Heroes. The Hands of God. The Hammer of Forbearance.

His nicknames were many and his legends had spread far, but much about the man remained a mystery to this day. Before I knew it, I had been captivated by his story, and I’ve now dedicated my life to pursuing research into his career.

He went by Eizo Tanya. His preeminent works as a blacksmith were the Holy Sword Lotzwalden, which had been passed down from hero to hero for generations, and the Infernal Rapier Stjestvedt, the venerated weapon of the Demon Queen.

However, his accomplishments extended far beyond those two blades. The renowned Drachentöter family, whose history began with the man known as the Dragonslayer, owes its reputation in part to this blacksmith; it was Eizo who’d forged the greatsword that the Dragonslayer had carried into battle. Eizo was also responsible for crafting the family’s heirloom, Spider Silk, which were the mithril ropes that had been used to subdue the dragon.

His works were scattered throughout the world, all bearing his sigil: the relief of the sitting fat cat. The man himself was a central figure in the history of individual families, countries, and even the world in its entirety.

Unfortunately, his was a private and secluded nature, so there were hardly any public records of the man at all, and his past was one giant question mark. Even the details of his family name, Tanya, could not be traced with any satisfaction; it is only known to be a name from the north.

Information about him was incredibly sparse, so I had hypothesized that

records of his past were intentionally erased. Upon further investigation, however, that appears to not be the case. The information simply does not exist.

Among those in his confidence was his sole apprentice, a female dwarven blacksmith named Rike Tanya.

Traditionally, dwarves take on the name of their workshop as their own family name. So as not to offend my interviewee, I could not ask her whether she'd taken the Tanya name in matrimony, or had simply been paying homage to her master.

The court of public opinion is firmly on the side of the former. It's said that Eizo had also taken the hands of many others in marriage. Nevertheless, there were no documents remaining, legal or otherwise, that could verify the truth of these rumors.

In recent years, there has been no news of the man in question. In all likelihood, he is no longer living and breathing in this world, but regardless, none of his acquaintances were willing to divulge his whereabouts. My guest today was no exception. The only thing I could say for certain is that he vanished.

After long years of searching and even longer years of pleading, my interviewee finally agreed to speak with me. The following is only one part of her story.

###

I was born to a dwarven household and there I was raised, a future blacksmith in a long line of blacksmiths; there was no one in my family who chose any other profession. I was the eldest of four siblings and had three younger brothers.

When dwarves come of age, they leave their homes to search for an apprenticeship. There's no standard age for when we embark on our journeys, so my brothers and I ventured out into the world together once we were around the right age.

Throughout our travels, we experienced and learned a vast array of new

things. Occasionally we'd encounter danger, but dwarves are a sturdy folk and we did not bow out easily. The only problem was that, after visiting numerous workshops in small villages, we still hadn't been able to find anyone suitable for our training.

Conversations with my brothers about our potential candidates were invariably lackluster.

"How did it go?" I would ask.

The responses were always lukewarm. "Weeeelll...nothing short of normal. I've met children who could do better work."

We had simply not yet found a workshop that astounded us with its craftsmanship or ingenuity. The reason we dwarves went out into the world was to bring back new techniques to our family workshops—the Moritz Workshop, in my case—so that we could continuously polish our craft. It was meaningless to apprentice ourselves to an average blacksmith's workshop.

In general, dwarves were stronger and more dexterous than humans, but humans had ingenuity on their side. New and improved products lay at the intersection of these skills, and apprenticeships were the key behind the dwarves' high-caliber creations.

My brothers and I went from village to village, swinging between hope and despair, before finally deciding to venture into the capital city. It was not ideal, but at the very least we figured that there would be a skilled smith there.

That was when I was struck with a revelation, a bolt of lightning from the heavens. At least, that was the most common comparison, but...how do I put this? To me, it wasn't as trivial as that. The breakthrough hit me with immense force as if Boss had struck me on the head with a hammer using all of his power. Of course, that's only an example—Boss would never actually do that.

Although...I should've asked him to try it out at least once.

Oh, right. Yes. Back to the story.

My brothers and I first stopped by a city near the capital where we met a particular guard. In truth, it wasn't the guard who drew me in, but rather, his

knife. It was lunchtime, so he was using the knife to cut strips of jerky. With just a single glance, I was entranced by the sharpness and luster of the blade. I went up to the soldier, and after exchanging greetings, I asked him, “Where did you obtain your knife?”

“This?” he asked. “Aaah, I see. You’re a dwarf, aren’t you, Miss?”

I nodded firmly. “Yes.”

“Then, are you looking to apprentice with the blacksmith who forged this knife?”

I was pleased that he was familiar with our customs; it would speed the conversation up considerably. With a heart full of anticipation, I popped the question.

“May I please see your knife for myself?”

Hearing my request, my brothers barged into the conversation, each with his own concerns.

“S-Sis, you can’t be considering what I think you are...”

“You’re gonna apprentice yourself to a blacksmith just because of this knife? You haven’t even seen them at work!”

“Not fair. We all want to join an elite workshop too.”

However, as the oldest sibling, let’s just say that I had first pick.

In any case, the guard was happy to oblige. “I don’t mind.”

He wiped the blade with a piece of cloth and passed it over to me. I inspected it as if—pardon my vulgar expression—I was licking it all over with my eyes.

The knife was exquisite. It was sturdy enough to be used as an everyday tool, but also quite refined. If there was a blacksmith out there who could produce a knife of this quality, why was this my first time seeing something like it?

My brothers crowded in from the side. They *oohed* and *aahed* as well, so I knew my eyes hadn’t failed me.

“Where does your smith live?” I asked the guard with a serious expression. “I would like to request an apprenticeship at that workshop.” I heard sighs and an

“aw shucks” from behind me—my brothers, no doubt—but I ignored them.

“Hmmm, unfortunately, I don’t know that myself. I don’t even know his name,” the guard answered.

“Then how did you procure this knife?”

“I bought it at the Open Market. He sets up shop there about once a week,” the guard explained. “The last time he came was four days ago, so he should be back in three days or so. I doubt he’ll be by today since I haven’t seen him yet.”

“I understand. In that case, I’ll wait until he comes,” I declared.

My brothers were not happy with my decision.

“Are you serious?”

“Siiis.”

We had enough of our traveling budget left for me to remain in this city for a while. Other than my brothers’ disapproval, there was no reason for me not to stay.

“I’ll wait here for three days. You go on ahead,” I told my brothers.

They’d all worn permanent expressions of consternation since we’d arrived at this city, but now, their frowns deepened even further. At this point, they were giant bundles of nerves.

“What are you gonna do if he turns you down?”

“It’ll be dangerous for you to travel without us.”

True. I didn’t have any reason to think that the blacksmith would allow me to become his apprentice, but somehow, I wasn’t worried. I had faith that everything would work out. “Don’t worry about me. I’m sure he’ll agree.”

Having grown up together, my brothers knew when I’d made up my mind.

“Not again.”

“She’s not gonna listen to us.”

“There’s no use arguing any further.”

I’d won over my brothers, so I settled in to wait for the blacksmith, both eager

and anxious.

I spent the next three days going back and forth between the city entrance and the Open Market. When I stopped by the gate on the first two days, the guard only shook his head. Still, I didn't give up. Both days, I wandered around the Open Market and stopped by different booths to ask the merchants if they'd heard anything. In the end though, I had nothing to show for my efforts.

The third and last day dawned. From what the guard had said, today would mark exactly one week since the blacksmith had last visited the city. If he didn't come today, there was no telling when he'd return. Would my share of the travel funds hold out until then?

The sun was high at its peak when I checked in at the city entrance, and a prayer was held fast in my mind. As luck would have it, today, the guard didn't shake his head at me but gave a definitive nod. I bowed to him in gratitude, turned heel, and rushed to the Open Market.

As usual, the market was crowded with people. I turned this way and that, eyes flitting restlessly around the different wares that the merchants were peddling.

Then, at last, a gleam of metal in the distance. I had found what I was looking for!

Knives of the same make as the guard's were strewn across the counter artlessly. I made my way over to the booth as quickly as I could.

When I got there, my words spilled out of me in a jumble. "E-Excuse me!"

The man in charge of the booth looked startled but responded, "Yes? Can I help you with anything?"

A half-tiger woman stood behind him staring at me menacingly, but I couldn't afford to be afraid. I pushed onward. "Are you the one who made the city guards' knives?!"

"Yes...that's me."

That was the day I came face-to-face with fate.

The Story of How We Met II: Lightning Blade's Melancholy

A gust of wind whipped across the battlefield, crimson and fierce.

On second thought, “wind” may not adequately describe the phenomenon. Why not, you ask? The answer is that any gust of wind is a mere tortoise compared to her speed.

The most appropriate metaphor would be a bolt of lightning striking down from the heavens to scorch the earth below. But instead of bridging the sky and ground, this bolt of lightning streaks across the earthen surface, its crimson hue signaling death to the enemies in its path.

Her namesake came from the terrible speed with which she raced across the battlefield—Lightning Blade.

There was one more reason behind this moniker, and that was the dual shortwords she wielded. They sliced down enemies with grace as they danced through the air. It was her duty, after all, to thin out the numbers of the other side, soldier by soldier.

This region had been entangled in a minor conflict for many years on end. Neither side had any intention of resolving the conflict, nor, indeed, of winning in the first place. Accordingly, once she had culled the opposing soldiers down to an acceptable number, Lightning Blade was retired from the front lines. After all, the side she was allied with was close to the precipice of victory. Better to remove her prowess from the fight and eliminate any chance of accidentally delivering a decisive and final blow.

At the moment that she, along with a number of her allies, was about to exit the battle, she found herself approached by a fellow soldier.

No, wait.

Though he'd looked friendly at a glance, he was actually a foe that had come to put a stop to the legend of the Lightning Blade. If he could take her down,

he'd be instantly able to turn the tides of the battle.

The man drew a shortsword hidden in his overcoat and thrust it at her. However, the motion had been a wasted effort. She swept the attack aside with her own sword, using such force that the man feared his hand would be torn from his wrist. As it was, his sword was ripped from his fingers and launched into the air beyond his reach.

Her own sword had not left the confrontation unscathed. Perhaps it was because of the power she'd put behind her counter, but the blade came away dented. She was, however, unfazed, and without missing a beat, she slew her enemy with her other sword.

And so the curtains lowered on our heroine as she emerged triumphant from her mission. No doubt, she'd be called into service another day, for that was her lot as a mercenary—but until then, she could rest.

###

I'd completed my mission successfully, but I couldn't help but *tsk* whenever I remembered what it'd cost me: one more sword in a long line of broken swords.

The blade was chipped all over its length, and the fittings which kept the sword together had warped and slackened as well. It was hanging on by a thread. I knew from previous experience that the blade could bear only a few more blows before it snapped entirely. Most swords didn't last long given the speed and force with which I wielded them, but I'd spent quite a pretty penny on this one.

Money wasn't a problem; I was always compensated well, befitting my reputation as Lightning Blade. However, I expected to receive the quality that I paid for, and a brittle sword was only a hindrance to my job. When a sword failed to live up to my expectations, it always put me in a bad mood.

I needed something better, a durable and strong sword that surpassed any I'd wielded up until now. My plan was to journey to the capital in search of a swordsmith who had the skills to forge the kind of sword I wanted. But before that, I thought I'd consult a merchant acquaintance of mine. I'd heard through the rumor mill that he'd recently established a store in the city ruled by Count

Eimoor. He'd traveled far and wide previously to peddle his wares, so he most likely already knew of a skilled blacksmith in the capital that I could call upon.

I received my payment and gathered up my meager belongings. Together with a group of people heading in the same direction, I set off to find a smith.

###

The journey from the battlefield on the country's border to the city took one to two weeks by foot. Since my companions and I weren't members of any mercenary guilds, we had no access to wagons or carriages.

My companions were all women. I'd traveled along with men once and only once before. It had been a pain in the ass, so I now journeyed exclusively with women.

Since we were all mercenaries, none of us could rightly be called ladylike, but we hadn't entirely killed off our maidenly sides. As we walked, we gossiped about handsome men we'd encountered on the battlefield, which one of us was starting to smell ripe, and who'd been doing it with whom during the mission.

As for me, I'd more or less sworn off anything as messy and burdensome as men.

Well...I wouldn't say no to a prince riding in on a white steed, but I knew better than to get my hopes up; there weren't many men out there who I could accept as my equal.

Boisterous and in high spirits, we made our way along a wild and overgrown road that was little more than a hunting trail. We were still far from our destination, but our first leg of the journey would bring us to an intermediary village.

After four days on the road, walking when the sun was out and camping at night, we finally arrived at the village. That being said, we didn't set foot within the bounds of it. There wasn't a single villager who would have any faith in mercenaries, nor any kindness to show us.

We were used to the prejudice. This lifestyle was steady as long as we won our battles, but there were mercenaries that acted no better than bandits after

suffering a loss. None of my companions nor I had any intention of such wanton cruelty even if we had lost, but the villagers made no such distinction.

We would detour around the village. It would add a couple of days to our journey, but the time was worth avoiding extra scrutiny. We had only aimed for this village because it was an easy landmark, but avoiding it was par for the course as a mercenary. From time to time, a mercenary would naively enter the village only to be driven right back out. Its defenses were infamous for being rigorous, even over-the-top, and a lone mercenary was no match.

We gave a wide berth to that village and eventually emerged onto a wide thoroughfare—the road into the city. Having come this far, all that was left was to follow it straight to my destination.

Our party split in half at this junction, and we parted ways with our companions who would be continuing in the opposite direction. Some of them I would never meet again. Farewells, both temporary and permanent, were unavoidable in this line of work.

I headed for the city with the few people who were going in the same direction. Our journey was merry and rowdy. Along the way, we passed several merchants in horse-drawn wagons, but none stopped to give us a ride. The odds were against us in that regard; there were few merchants who would be so kind. There were even ones who would agree to carry us, but with ulterior motives. We were a group of women after all, and the gazes we attracted were unlikely to be pure. I'd experienced that kind of unwanted attention firsthand when I'd been a novice, and I had no desire to relive it again.

On the road, we alternated standing guard in shifts. We replenished our supplies at amicable towns along the way and said goodbyes to our companions when the time came. In a few instances, we took down bandits and earned pocket change for our efforts. In the blink of an eye, ten days had passed since we'd been on the road.

For part of the journey, a large forest nudged against one side of the road alongside us, with endless rows of trees disappearing into the distance. It was the Black Forest, a dangerous location that was home to boars, wolves, and bears. Even the imperial army avoided its depths. Since time immemorial,

forests had been a popular place for crooks to lay in ambush. Indeed, I'd even been contracted to suppress such petty resistances in the past. However, none would dare enter the Black Forest, so fearsome was its reputation.

Nevertheless, there *were* people who lived in the forest unharmed: the beastfolk. If I had a chance and was ever permitted, I'd like to ask one how they avoided the forest's many perils; the information would undoubtedly be useful in my line of work.

But for the moment, I'd soon be arriving at my destination. The city's outer walls had come into clear view. I was the only one stopping here, as the other women were heading straight for the capital, which was only a short trip away from this city. The capital's greater population meant more jobs would be available, which made it a popular choice as a final destination.

A guard in metal armor stood at the gate. He looked like a bit of a cad.

Before going through the entrance, I waved goodbye to the last of my companions.

"All right, I understand what you're looking for," the merchant said, taking a long look at the dilapidated shortsword I'd just handed him.

This merchant's name was Camilo. Once I'd arrived at his store, I'd quickly recapped why I'd come to see him.

After taking his time to think, he asked me a question. "From what I can tell, this sword is already quite the impressive specimen. Can't you commission a new one from the same swordsmith?"

"No. I need a blade that'll surpass this one."

"It's going to cost you," he cautioned.

"No problem," I insisted, leaning forward in my zeal. "This is a matter of life and death for me. Price is no object."

My swords were the one thing I refused to compromise on. Even if Camilo said that the only one who could meet my expectations was the top blacksmith in the country, and even if they charged a gold coin per sword, I would happily

pay the price.

Camilo had retreated back into his thoughts, twirling his mustache with his finger. I'd come to learn his habits in the time that I'd known him. The gesture meant that he already had someone in mind; he was only debating whether to tell me or not.

I was just starting to wonder if I'd have to wring the identity of his smith out of him by force when he clapped his hands together and declared, "Very well. I suppose I'll tell you."

"So you *do* have a person in mind?" I pressed.

"Yes. He's the greatest blacksmith I've ever met. I dare say he's the best of our era. He'll leave his mark on history."

"It's rare for you to sing another's praises."

Camilo took a knife out of his pocket. It was on the smaller side and had the motif of a cat—a rather cute one—carved into its pommel. "The man I have in mind forged this knife."

I glanced at him. He caught my look and nodded at my unspoken request, sliding the knife out of its scabbard. It was of beautiful quality, and it came close to the caliber I was imagining, though it still fell a tad short of the mark.

Given the skill it must've taken to forge this knife, the blacksmith must be from one of the prominent noble families in the capital. Just how much did Camilo have to cough up to get his hands on it?

"He made this knife without even using his full abilities. His words," Camilo said. "It was cheap too, although I did get a slight discount for buying in bulk."

He told me the price.

I couldn't hold back my shock. "Seriously?"

Your average villager could afford to buy that knife if they worked to save up money. It was out of the question for a blacksmith from the capital to sell a knife of this standard for the price Camilo had mentioned.

And this knife wasn't even the best the smith could make? Then what *could* he make if he put his mind to it?

“He told me I could introduce anyone I approved of,” Camilo continued.

“Well? Don’t leave me hanging!” I said, leaning even closer.

“Now, now, calm down. I’ll tell you under two conditions.”

“What?”

“The first condition is his. You have to go see him alone,” he said.

“All right,” I agreed readily.

“The second condition is mine. You must keep the location a secret. You mustn’t tell anyone else.”

“I have to see him in person?” I verified.

“Yes, you do. He’s got a good head for business, of course, but...hmmm, how do I put this?” he mused. “He’s got a good heart but can be a bit of a birdbrain. Can you guess where he first sold these blades?”

“Where...?”

“In the Open Market.”

“Wha—” I was rendered speechless.

He sold such high-quality goods in the Open Market? Of all places?! There was no way the people who frequented that market could understand or appreciate his workmanship! “Birdbrained” was right.

Besides, if the city blacksmiths had gotten a whiff of his business—let alone the lord himself—it would’ve caused quite the commotion.

“What can I say? That’s just who he is,” Camilo said with a shrug. “I don’t want to get him into any hot water.”

“Say no more. I understand you perfectly,” I replied.

Camilo smiled wryly, looking a touch overwhelmed and out of his depth, but he mumbled a quiet word of gratitude in response.

It was a blessing that the smith was now partnered with Camilo. If he’d continued his slapdash business, he would’ve stirred up trouble sooner or later.

“All right, I’m choosing to trust you,” Camilo said.

“Thanks.”

“The blacksmith’s name is Eizo—” he began.

I cut in. “He’s from the north then.”

“Apparently. That’s what he told me at least.”

In my work as a mercenary, I’d had to fight alongside Nordic folk in the past. The name Eizo had a ring to it that reminded me of other names from the region.

“There’s one more thing,” Camilo said.

“What else can there be?” I snapped, starting to lose my patience. “Out with it already.”

He smirked at me. “Well, that is... He lives in the Black Forest.”

My hand moved of its own accord, and I slapped Camilo upside the head without thinking. I was sure he was messing with me, but he insisted that he was telling the truth. I had no choice but to believe him and travel into the Black Forest.

The moment I set foot into the forest proper, a chill ran down my spine. Ink-black trees towered high above me, blocking the light. The sun was still high in the sky, but beneath the canopy it was dark.

“At least pick a place where normal people live,” I grumbled to distract myself from my unease.

Camilo had told me the location of the workshop and landmarks to watch out for. However, if I were distracted for even a moment, I’d lose my way. I had no doubt—anyone who got lost in here would stay lost. Forever.

After carefully inspecting my surroundings, I found what looked to be tracks left by foot traffic and wagon wheels. If I just followed these tracks, I should have no problems. This was the first and only time I’d ever been grateful for my background as a mercenary.

The shrieking of birds and insects.

The ominous presence of wild beasts.

The gloom.

Put everything together and the result was an oppressive and terrifying atmosphere. But in reality, it wasn't so scary. Along the way, I was only startled once by a rustle in a thicket as I was passing by, but it turned out to be a cute bunny rabbit.

At last, I arrived at a clearing. In the middle of it stood a cabin.

Smoke climbed high into the sky from the chimney, and that smoke was the beacon I'd been following this entire time. The blacksmith was already hard at work. I could hear the ring of metal striking metal.

I was briefly flummoxed as to which of the two doors to knock on. I figured that I was most likely to find people where the noise was loudest, so I followed the sound and chose the door closest to it. I walked over and rapped my knuckles sharply against the wood.

"I was told by Camilo to come here! I want to commission a sword!"

From inside, a man called out, "All right, all right, I'm coming." He had a warm and languid voice.

I heard the clank of a latch being removed.

Tension and excitement battled for dominance within my body. My heart was even racing, which was quite unusual for me.

I waited with bated breath to see what kind of man my swordsmith would be.

Acknowledgments

I'd open with a classic "nice to meet you," but perhaps we've already met before. I go by the name Tamamaru when I moonlight as a writer.

Kakuyomu is a web novel site where users upload their own works. I submitted an entry to the fourth Kakuyomu Web Novel Contest and won the grand prize in the isekai fantasy category. Thanks to the contest, my work was novelized and delivered into your hands.

Among the people who have picked up this book and are reading these acknowledgments, there are those who have been following the series on the web while it was being uploaded to Kakuyomu and Shosetsuka ni Naro. I am deeply grateful for your support.

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Above all, my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to my dear readers.

And to those of you who are standing around and reading these words in a bookstore, I would be evermore grateful if you would take this book with you to the register.

I hope we'll meet again at the end of volume two!



My Quiet **BLACKSMITH** Life in Another World

RIKE

... ..
A dwarf who begged her way into an apprenticeship with Eizo after being captivated by his skills.

SAMYA

... ..
A half-tiger girl who's one of the beastfolk. She came to live with Eizo after he rescued her from the brink of death.

EIZO

... ..
A man who loves cats and working with his hands. Formerly a corporate drone.



She's just demonstrating her moveset, so it's not like she'll be seriously attacking me.

You're strong!

HELEN

... A mercenary
dubbed Lightning Blade.
Commissioned a set of custom
model swords from Eizo.

My Quiet
BLACKSMITH
Life in Another World



1

Tamamaru
Illustrator Kinta



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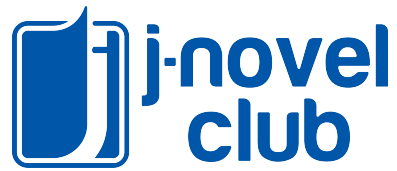
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My Quiet Blacksmith Life in Another World: Volume 1

by Tamamaru

Translated by Linda Liu Edited by C.D. Leeson

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